

Outside Context Problem

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Summary: (1) In an alternate world where Spartans fight endlessly, the arrival of a new threat shifts the balance of power and threatens to destroy everything they know. (23) As the OCP marches on the city of Nasces, it seems all is lost but for the Spartans of Aspertias, who hatch a final plan to save the beleaguered city and Spartans as a species.

1. The short road to disillusionment (1)

A note-

This is an original story based off Halo multiplayer. The Setting, Characters and Story are all original, although you will recognize the names of equipment and vehicles used. The setting imagines what would happen if there were a huge world, filled with a never ending multiplayer battle between different clans of Spartans. The story follows a squad of soldiers from one of these clans.

Outside Context Problem

The Short Road to Disillusionment

The morning sun shone over the edifice that was the scorpions base. From the open back of the pelican, Gigolo could see miles of steep mountains in its golden light. He didn't appreciate it much.

'Lights' gonna make it hard to get in unseen', he said over the team channel.

'True', Atlas echoed.

'Then I guess you're gonna actually have to work for once,' Midori taunted.

'Nah,' said Gigolo. 'This is still gonna be a piece of cake for me.'

He stretched his body, encased in the suit of power armor. He could hear Midori tutting over the channel.

'Stop the chatter,' snapped Zero. 'We drop in 10 seconds. Standard formation.'

The light on the rear of the pelican flashed green, and Zero jumped out of the back of the pelican. Gigolo took a breath, then followed him. His tracker showed Elesa 10 meters behind him and to his left, while Midori was a little way behind her on his right. Vivian brought up the rear.

He turned his attention to what his visor showed him. He could see Zero 15 meters ahead of him, and beyond him, the Scorpion base, approaching rapidly. The base seemed to be abandoned; though he knew that Elesa would probably be able to spot some life. Most of the Scorpions were out attacking his own base, Aspertias.

'Decarabia, on me.' Zero called. 'Deploy airbrakes... now.'

Gigolo ignored the order. As the rest of Decarabia squad slowed, he sped onwards. After a few more seconds, he deployed his airbrake. He slowed rapidly, landing to a running stop on the roof of the tallest building in the base. Behind him, the rest of his squad came to a slower stop on the roof.

'Gigolo!' Zero shouted. Gigolo smiled inside his helmet.

'Yes sir?' He asked innocently. Zero was silent for a moment, then spoke again.

'You disobeyed a direct order.' His voice was once again quiet and controlled.

'Because you ordered us to slow to early. As I showed-' He gestured to himself- 'We could have left braking till later, and still been safe.' Zero turned away.

'Except whatever time you might have saved you just wasted,' Elesa muttered.

'Squad, move up.' Zero said over the channel.

Gigolo gave himself a mental handshake. I showed him up! He thought, happy. The others will have to see soon. He's an awful leader.

He hurried after the rest of the squad. In his helmet he brought up an image of the layout of scorpion base. Vivian had marked a route for the squad to take that should, in theory, allow them to avoid the majority of the defenses. Even so, there were a number of guard posts marked, the first of which was directly beneath the ledge Zero was running towards.

Zero stopped at the edge of the overhang. 'Can you see anything, Elesa?'

Elesa slowly turned her head, covering the entire of the overhang. 'Three guards below. Looks like they have shotguns,' she said quietly.

'Right,' Zero said. 'Gigolo, go camouflaged and get into position to take one out. When you're there, we'll drop and kill the others.'

Gigolo mock saluted, then turned his camouflage on. He jumped over the edge, sliding down the side of the building, and then jumped into the balcony below. There were, as Elesa had said, three guards, all holding shotguns. Two of them sat in chairs, while the third stood at the railing, staring out across the plain. They didn't seem to have realized that Decarabia had landed. Gigolo carefully stepped over the railing, at the edge of the balcony, and then took up position behind one of the sitting Spartans, his shotgun trained on his head. He sent the 'ready' message.

Midori and Zero jumped over the edge. The Scorpion troops jumped to their feet, struggling to pull their weapons to bear. Gigolo stood and fired a round at point blank into the man in front of him, then twisted and fired another into the other sitting spartan. Midori punched the standing troop in the face, while zero spun behind him and slit his throat with a knife. Moments later Elesa and Vivian jumped down as well.

'Two for me' said Gigolo, smiling.

'Keep the channel clear.' Zero snapped.

'All right, keep your wig on...' Gigolo muttered.

'Vivian, take point,' Zero said. 'Midori and Gigolo behind. Elesa, with me. Go.'

Vivian began jogging forward, into the room adjacent to the balcony. She swept her sights over the room, not seeing any enemies. Gigolo kept close behind her, also keeping his guard up.

'Two coming in from the right,' Elesa said quietly. Vivian dived through the doorway into the connecting corridor. Immediately the two Spartans opened fire, giving away their location and allowing Elesa to fire a sniper shot through the wall. One of the Spartans was flung against the wall. The other was stunned for a moment- long enough for Vivian to run up and kick him back. She finished him off with a shot from her DMR.

'We have to go this way,' Vivian said. She began to run to the left. Gigolo ran into the corridor, glancing around to check for enemies. Satisfied, he began to follow Vivian. Midori ran close behind.

'Right,' Vivian said. She grabbed onto the wall and span into the corridor, keeping her momentum. She began sprinting down the new hallway.

'Hey, Viv' baby,' Gigolo said, panting. 'Maybe you could slow down a little?'

'Zero?' Vivian asked.

'Do it.'

Gigolo turned and saw that Zero wasn't having any trouble. That's not fair. He's a scout. He has to be fit.

'The core is just ahead,' Vivian said calmly, now only jogging.

'Slow down a bit,' Zero ordered.

The squad came to a halt by a door at the end of the hallway.

'Through here,' Vivian said.

'Midori, blow it,' ordered Zero. Midori pulled a charge from her pack and placed it on the door. She jumped back and blew the charge. Immediately bullets whizzed through the space where the door had just been. Midori's shield flared as bullets deflected off it. She jumped away from the doors.

'Two machine gun turrets, protected by a shield.' She said, panting.

'Damn,' Zero said. 'Right, Midori, blow it.'

'Hey boss,' Gigolo said. 'I could do it?'

'People coming.' Elesa said quietly.

Zero looked at him for a moment, then back at Midori. 'Midori, do it. Vivian, we're going to follow up.'

Midori pulled a rocket launcher from her back. She checked it was loaded, took a breath, and then jumped across the doorway, firing. Two rockets flew down the corridor, blowing up at the shield. The shield flared, then gave out. At that moment, Zero and Vivian both jumped into the corridor, firing from their precision weapons. The bullets found their targets heads, killing instantly. Zero didn't pause, running towards the door.

Gunfire sounded from where they had come from. Elesa's sniper fired twice, and the other guns fell silent. 'More coming,' She said.

'Get down here,' Zero ordered. Elesa scrambled to her feet, following Zero into the core room. Gigolo glanced down the corridor again, then followed them into the chamber.

Countless pipes and tubes fed into the huge metal brick that was the scorpion's core. Shaped like a squat cylinder, the core pulsated with an eerie blue light, which filled the room that housed it. Gigolo found himself drawn to it, somehow.

'So do we blow it?' Midori asked.

'I bet you love that,' Gigolo said. 'Gotcha!'

'Shut it asshole,' Midori replied, holding a fist up.

'Wait,' Zero said. He held a hand up. 'Damn. Command wants us to fall back.'

'Why?' Vivian asked.

'Yeah, why the hell? We're at their damn core,' Gigolo said, irritated.

'Scorpions are retreating back here. ETA 1 minute.'

Midori looked at Vivian. 'Please tell me you have an escape route.' Vivian nodded.

'We go out via the motor pool. This way.' She began to jog towards a door on the other side of the room. Gigolo sighed, then ran after her.

All this running... I bet those guys in the major squads don't have to do this.

'We'll rendezvous with Cerberus at the motor pool,' Vivian said. 'They'll help us break out of here.'

The elevator was only a short distance from the core room. Decarabia sprinted the way there. Gigolo decided it was best not to complain.

'Do we wait for it?' Midori asked.

'Hell with that,' Gigolo said. He pulled his shotgun and blew the lock on the doors. They tumbled inwards, exposing the elevator shaft. 'We'll slide down on the rope. Simple, eh?'

Zero nodded. 'Midori, you first.'

Midori jumped into the open shaft, one hand catching the rope. She began to slide down. Gigolo jumped in after her.

'Woohoo!' He yelled.

'Quiet,' Zero ordered.

'Spoilsport,' Gigolo muttered back.

Zero jumped in after him, followed by Vivian and Elesa. Shouts started to echo from above- their exit route had been found.

'Car coming up!' Midori screamed suddenly.

'Hold on-' Zero yelled, but was cut off by a sudden screech of metal. Gigolo shut his eyes in anticipation. Nothing happened. He opened them, and saw the elevator car above him, a large hole bored through the middle. He breathed out slowly.

'Here's the bottom,' Midori shouted. She jumped off the cable and through the open doorway at the bottom. Gigolo followed her. Behind him he heard thumps as the rest of the squad also made the jump.

Immediately gunfire started up.

'Get to cover!' Zero yelled. Gigolo didn't need any encouragement. He jumped behind a blockade as a machine gun raked the spot he had just

been standing in. The rest of the squad took cover behind other blockades.

'9 Enemies armed with heavy weaponry.' Elesa's voice remained impassive as she read the situation.

'Damn. Where are Cerberus?' Midori asked.

'Dead.' Elesa said quietly. She paused. 'Getting a signal-torchbearers coming into the cavern.'

'What? Why are they here?'

'Never mind that,' Gigolo said impatiently. 'How many of them?'

'20 or so. Looks like- yes, they're engaging the Scorpions.' Elesa looked from side to side, her Promethean vision picking up the firefight.

'Lets go,' Zero said. 'Mop them up.' Gigolo pulled his assault rifle, then vaulted the blockade. A handful of Scorpions still stood in the center of the motor pool. One let out a shout as he saw Gigolo. He was quickly dropped by Gigolo's assault rifle. Vivian and Zero picked the rest off with their DMR's.

When the battle was over, the leader of the torchbearers came running up to Zero.

'We spotted the Scorpions coming back and thought we might give you a hand. Looks like we were just in time, eh?' He cleared his visor, smiling widely.

'Thank you very much,' Zero said politely.

'We can get the pleasantries over later, surely.' Gigolo cracked his knuckles impatiently. 'We should get out of here before any more Scorpions show up.' The Torchbearer leader nodded, and motioned for his troops to get into the nearby warthogs. Zero and the rest of the squad did the same.

'Would it have killed them to give me a bit more warning? This bird isn't made for dogfighting,' Atlas complained. Midori shrugged.

'I guess we're not very high on their list of priorities. We only got a minutes warning, anyway. And besides, its not like you can't dogfight- heck, you took down a couple of them.' Atlas shook his head.

'Yeah, yeah, I know.'

A red light appeared, blinking on the Pelican's dashboard. Atlas flipped a switch, then put his head to the microphone.

'This is LS 6 Pelican, Decarabia squad, coming into dock at Aspertias Base.'

'We read you Decarabia, you are cleared to dock.' There was a moment of static, before a different, harsher voice cut in. 'Tell Zero I want to see all of you in the Ops room in 1 hour. Meier out.'

Atlas groaned. 'Meier's gonna give us another good shouting,' he said.

'You don't know that for sure,' Midori replied. Atlas looked at her despairingly.

'Yes, yes I do,' He said, rubbing his head. 'Ever since this squad was formed, all he's done is yell at us. We've become the laughing stock of the clan.'

'Tell me about it later,' Midori replied. 'We're about to dock.'

The pelican cleared the final mountain ridge, and all of a sudden Aspertias base was in view. It was a magnificent edifice, carved from an entire mountain, and rising hundreds of meters above the base of the valley. It was protected by sheer drops on three sides by sheer drops to the valley floor, and connected to the main road by a single winding track. The buildings were made out of white stone, fitting with the limestone make up of the mountain, and many spires and towers could be seen jutting out of the central area. It looked like a huge, glittering castle.

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Atlas brought the pelican to land on one of the upper bays. Metal claws swung out and grabbed onto the side of the aircraft, anchoring it firmly.

'We've arrived,' he called, walking out of the pilot compartment and into the cargo area.

'Any news?' Vivian asked. Atlas nodded.

'Meier wants to see us in ops in an hour.'

Zero sighed. 'Take a break until then. Make sure you have your best uniforms on.' He got up and walked out of the back of the pelican, followed quickly by Vivian.

'Look at those lovebirds,' Gigolo jeered. 'I honestly don't know why she likes him. Maybe she's just into failures?'

'Shut up.' Elesa stood sharply and walked out of the back of the pelican. Atlas shrugged.

'To be honest, I can't see anyone ever loving you either, Gigolo.' He kept his face impassive for a few moments, then broke into a smile. Gigolo punched him playfully.

'Shall we go?' Midori asked, walking out of the aircraft.

'See you then Gigolo,' Atlas said. He followed Midori out of the pelican. 'Where shall we spend our hour of relaxation, then?'

'I thought we'd go to Harry's. They have some real nice non alcoholic cocktails. But first we'd better change out of our armor, eh?'

'Sure. I'll see you there in 5 minutes, okay?' Atlas walked off towards the male changing rooms. He walked into one of the large

cubicles and began to take his armor off. Once it was all off, he deposited it in the wall chute, and pulled a set of overalls from the dispenser.

After freshening himself, Atlas checked a map for directions to Harry's, and then walked the distance there. Midori was already sitting at the bar, browsing through the drinks menu. She waved when she saw him. Atlas grinned. He really had the hots for Midori, with her slim but powerful body, straight brown hair, and vaguely eastern face.

'I thought they said women took longer to change,' she said with a smile.

'That's a blatant generalization. Some men like to make themselves feel pretty now and again.' Midori laughed.

'It's been too long since we got to relax together. We need to get to more parties.' She placed her finger on an image in the menu. 'I'll have this one, please.' The bartender nodded and walked away.

'Easier said than done. Meier seems intent on running us into the ground.' Atlas sighed. 'What did we do to deserve this?'

'Nothing as far as I can see,' Midori replied. 'Thanks,' she said to the bartender, taking her drink.

'That's it. It's all Zero's fault. Meier only hates him- goodness knows why- but he takes it out on all of us. It's not fair.'

'Hey, I'm sure it's not all Zero's fault. He's a good tactician, as much as Gigolo tries to disprove it.'

'He's made one mistake after another recently. He let those bandits get away with the shipment of ammo, he failed to knock out those defenses last week... I could go on, you know.'

Midori folded her arms. 'Hey, can we please change the subject? Look, I know all about your vendetta against Zero- god knows you've told me about it enough- but we're supposed to be relaxing, not moaning about our squad leader.'

Atlas held up his hands. 'Just saying, alright? Besides, it's important. Gigolo thinks that if we don't get a new squad leader we could all be kicked out of the clan.'

'And let me guess- this new squad leader is him. Gigolo has the leadership skills of a porcupine, Atlas.'

'Hey, give him a chance.'

'Maybe you should give Zero a chance. We've been in this squad for what- two months now, and you're already bitching about him. It doesn't look good to our superiors, you know.'

'Yeah, I guess you're right.' Atlas accepted his drink from the bartender and took a long drink. 'So,' he said, wiping his mouth. 'Do you reckon Zero and Vivian are an item, or just friends?'

'Well,' Midori said, 'I don't honestly know. Vivian doesn't tend to be very chatty about her private life.'

'They spend a lot of time together.' Atlas said.

'Yeah, and Vivian seems to really trust Zero. But, I dunno.' Midori looked thoughtful. 'They don't seem like they're in love or anything. Plus,' she leaned in towards Atlas, 'don't tell anyone I said this, but apparently they used to be together, but had a break up or something ages ago. It's anyone's guess what they are now.'

'You know, I never thought of you as a gossip, Midori,' Atlas said, his face a disapproving frown.

'Hey!' Midori looked hurt. 'You brought it up.'

Atlas grinned. 'Just teasing doll.' Midori faked a frown and turned back to her drink.

'So this is where you got to,' Gigolo said from behind Atlas.

'Hello Gigolo,' Midori said politely. She looked pointedly at her watch. 'I should get going. It'll take me a while to change into my uniform. You two be good, okay?' She kissed Atlas on the cheek and walked away. Gigolo watched her leave.

'Stop checking her out,' Atlas said wearily.

'I'm not checking her out,' Gigolo said, distracted.

'Yes, you are.'

'Fine, whatever,' Gigolo said petulantly. He turned to face Atlas. 'Her body aside, what is her problem with me?'

'I don't know if anyone has ever told you this, Gigolo, but you are kinda hard to get along with.'

Gigolo looked offended. 'I resent that. They just don't make the effort.'

'No, its more how you're always insulting people and making fun of them.'

'They just can't take a joke.' Gigolo stretched his back. 'Anyway, did you see how I totally showed Zero up during the mission? That was pretty good, right?'

Atlas shook his head. 'No, because as Elesa pointed out, you then went on to squander whatever time you might have gained by rubbing it in Zero's face.'

'Good point,' Gigolo said. He looked at Atlas concernedly. 'Hey man, you're not dropping out on me now are you? You know we gotta get zero fired or else we're going to be next.'

Atlas smiled. 'No, I'm still with you. But you need to get the rest of the squad on our side, and I don't think Vivian or Elesa like you very much. So- just try and keep your aggravating side to a minimum, okay?'

'Yeah, sure. Whatever.' Gigolo stood up. 'I'm gonna go get changed. Got to be on time to make a good impression on the general.' He turned and walked out.

Atlas finished his drink. 'I don't think that's going to endear you much to Meier,' he said to nobody.

Atlas took the elevator back to his quarters. He changed into his dress uniform, making sure to have it as neat as possible, and then took the elevator up to the highest floor of the base. He stepped out into the bustling ops room, filled with people working at terminals and typing unintelligible code into machines. Atlas nodded to a few people he knew, then walked into the briefing room set into the corner.

Midori, Gigolo and Elesa were already there, standing to attention. Atlas stood beside Gigolo and checked the clock- it was exactly the time that they had been ordered to be there.

After a few more minutes the doors opened again to let Vivian and Zero in. They stood themselves next to Elesa. Gigolo couldn't hide his smile.

'So what were you too lovebirds doing, eh? Something dirty? Ooooh.' He started laughing.

'Silence!' an imposing voice ordered. Atlas turned his head and saw General Meier walk into the room. 'Does something seem funny to you?' He shouted at Gigolo.

'No sir.' Gigolo stood up as straight as he could. Atlas turned his head back to face straight in front of him, hoping not to give Meier any reason to shout at him.

'Really? Then why were you laughing?' Meier bellowed.

'No reason sir.'

'Really? Is that so, you pathetic excuse for a close quarters soldier?'

Gigolo swallowed. 'Yes sir.'

Meier paused, then walked towards Zero. 'Zero. Your name betrays your usefulness.'

Zero didn't move.

'Your career has been one catastrophe after another. Once again you failed at your task of destroying the scorpion's core.'

'Sir, we were told to fall back.' Zero spoke impassively, no hint of emotion in his voice.

'Did I say you could speak?' Meier stood behind Zero. 'Yes, you were told to fall back, but it takes a pretty weak leader to be right at the enemies core and not attack it, doesn't it?'

'Sir, I fail to see why you are angry at us. At least we survived,'

unlike Cerberus team.'

'Cerberus only died because you weren't fast enough to save them. They performed admirably, actually, despite their lack of useful support. I shall be speaking with them as soon as they respawn.'

Atlas could see Zero's jaw clench. He looked at Gigolo, who smiled.

'You shall have another chance to redeem yourselves. I am this close-' He held two fingers together- 'to kicking your entire squad out of the clan. Give me a reason not to.' He turned and walked out of the room.

'Well, that's a bummer,' Atlas said. 'What's our assignment?'

'Escort a convoy from Nasces to torchbearer base,' Vivian said. 'Meier wants us gone in an hour.'

'Suit up, everyone. We're leaving as soon as we can,' ordered Zero.

'What about sleep?' Gigolo asked.

'We'll sleep in the pelican. Now go.'

'Well,' said Atlas, as he turned to leave. 'This can't be too difficult, can it?'

2. The short road to disillusionment (2)

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At the very southern end of the northern continent lay the largest city of the continent, Nasces. It's size was incredible by Decarabia's standards- 7 kilometers across, with a population in the hundreds of thousands, and over 150 individual cores. It was a home for hundreds of clans, all existing in a state of semi-permanent war, as if the northern clan wars were magnified several times. Despite the constant battles, the city was astounding to look at- several massive skyscrapers rose from the center of the city, almost the size of the towers at Aspertias base. Other examples of large scale engineering dotted the city, such as huge road bridges, and a cargo port spread several kilometers across the city's southern flank. No-one knew who built them- the names of the clans were long forgotten, lost in the city's melting pot of alliances and betrayals.

The squad spent barely an hour there, loading the Torchbearer's transport vehicles, before they got into their own pelican and flew north again. Away from the lush lowlands of the coast, the land quickly rose up into a series of alpine valleys. Thin logging trails led through the tall forests; as the ground convoy passed deer scattered and birds flew away, squawking.

'This sucks,' Gigolo said.

'Shut up.' Elesa replied, barely glancing away from her scope.

'Yeah, stop complaining,' Midori said. 'At least we're not doing anything dangerous, or demeaning.'

'I'm surprised Meier gave us something so easy,' Vivian said. 'I assumed he'd want us to fail.'

Gigolo laughed. 'Yeah, I'm sure he's really not as nasty as he seems. Underneath that sour exterior he probably has a heart of gold.'

'Nah,' Atlas said over the intercom, 'I bet he's set something up for us.'

'That's a possibility,' Gigolo said. He turned to Zero. 'Hey, seeing as you're the one who got us into this mess- what do you reckon Meier's planning?'

Zero stared at Gigolo. 'Meier won't have set anything up. And shut up.'

'Oh, strong words,' Gigolo jeered. 'Just because you're the squad leader- actually, why are you even the squad leader? Because you've been here the longest?'

'Give it a rest, Gigolo,' Midori said. 'If anyone's going to screw this mission up, it will be you with your constant bickering.'

'What is your problem with Zero?' Elesa said suddenly. 'Why do you always have a go at him? You're doing the most damage here.'

Gigolo held his hands up. 'Hey, I'm not the one who got us into this mess. Remember that.'

Elesa turned to Midori. 'Why do you hang out with him so much? He's an ass.'

Midori laughed. 'He sure is El, he sure is.'

'Hey! I'm here you know!' Gigolo shouted, angry.

'Not so nice when you're on the receiving end of the jokes, is it?' Vivian said.

'Well, we all know he's a hypocrite.' Zero stood up, staring Gigolo down.

'Oh, so I'm the hypocrite am I?' Gigolo shouted. 'I'm the one who is ruining everyone's lives?'

'Well you sure as hell aren't fixing them.'

'You're an awful leader. There- I said it. We'd be better off with an insect running this squad.' Gigolo stood up as well.

'Which is what we'd get if you ran it,' Vivian said quietly.

'Oh, and I suppose you'd be far better?' Zero asked Gigolo.

'Yes, I would. Its not hard to be better than you, Zero. We all agree don't we? Zero is an awful leader.' Gigolo looked around the other people sat in the pelican.

Zero sighed, then ran forward and punched Gigolo across the face.

'Hey!' Midori shouted.

Gigolo staggered backwards. Zero kicked him in the chest, then followed with a knee as he doubled up. Gigolo fell to the floor, gasping.

As Zero turned away, Gigolo caught his breath, and stood up. He charged Zero, pinning him to a wall. As Zero tried to regain focus, he began to rain punches down on the other man's face. Vivian and Midori rushed forward to pull them apart. They wrenched Gigolo off of Zero, still struggling.

'Guys- Hostiles!' Atlas cried from the cockpit. 'Missiles launched. Taking evasive maneuvers.'

The pelican lurched suddenly. Gigolo reeled backwards, and fell out of the back of the pelican. Midori screamed and threw herself forwards. She caught Gigolo's hand as he fell away, screaming.

'Damn it Zero, help me!' She shouted. After a moment of indecision, Zero ran and leaned out of the back of the pelican, taking care to anchor himself securely.. He grabbed Gigolo's hand.

'Pull!' Midori shouted.

Zero heaved, but the pelican lurched again and he nearly slipped out. 'It's a little tricky right now!'

'What are we going to do then?' Midori cried.

'Wait- Atlas!' Zero shouted.

'A little busy here,' Atlas replied testily.

'Fly straight down!'

'Are you mad?' Atlas shouted.

'Gigolo's life depends on it,' Zero replied. Atlas grunted, and Midori felt the pelican flip downwards. The open back of the aircraft pointed upwards, and Gigolo came flying in. Midori overbalanced and fell back towards the cabin door. She felt Zero grab her arm and slam it into the floor. She cried out at the pain.

'I can't maintain this!' Atlas yelled. The pelican pulled up sharply, and the open back of the pelican started pointing downwards all of a sudden. Midori suddenly understood what Zero had done- she was now anchored relatively securely. She glanced over and saw that Zero had also done the same to Gigolo, who seemed to have passed out.

After a few minutes of maneuvers, the pelican's flight eased out. Midori pulled her hand free from the floor of the pelican, and the

rest of the squad untied their restraints.

'Maybe you should close the back door,' she shouted to Atlas. There was a grunt over the radio, and the door closed. She turned around to see Zero standing by Vivian.

'Check Gigolo,' he ordered. Midori shrugged, and bent over Gigolo. She slapped him a few times, which seemed to wake him up. Muttering incoherently, Gigolo got to his feet. He shook his head a few times.

'Oh man...' He said. Then he looked at Zero. 'You bloody ass! I could have died!' he shouted.

'I saved you.' Zero said.

'Yeah, well you took your damn time about it! And wasn't this your fault anyway?'

'Actually,' Vivian said quietly, 'I think you started it.'

'Shut up!' Gigolo shouted. He pointed at Zero. 'You attacked me! You physically assaulted me!' He clenched his hands, then seemed to calm down. 'When we get back, I'm going to report you, and then you'll be kicked out of the clan.'

'I wouldn't do that if I were you,' Elesa said.

'Huh? Why not, then?'

'Because,' Vivian said, 'If you do, chances are General Meier will decide that we're all lost causes, seeing as none of us are capable of cooperating with each other. He'll kick us all out.'

'And if that happens,' Elesa said quietly, 'I will hunt you down and make you pay.'

Gigolo visibly flinched from Elesa. 'Fine,' he said. 'But sooner or later, whether I help it or not, Meier is going to kick us out of the clan. Unless,' he pointed at Zero again, 'He leaves.' Gigolo turned and walked through the door to the cockpit. 'Think about it.'

Midori turned to Zero. 'I'll try and get him to calm down.'

'You'd better,' Zero said. 'Or else he is going to get us all kicked out.'

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Atlas brought the pelican into the torchbearers base in a lazy circle over the torchbearer base. The base was a relatively mundane affair, compared to Aspertias base. It stood several stories high, a squat black building perched half way up a mountain. A narrow road snaked up to it. The aircraft touched down on one of the upper landing pads, next to some pelicans belonging to the other clan.

'We've touched down,' Zero said over the radio.

'Confirmed,' the torchbearer leader said. 'We're bringing the convoy in through the lower entrance. See you soon.'

'What now?' Vivian asked.

'Now we just wait, I guess,' Midori said. Zero shrugged.

'Atlas?' Elesa asked.

'Yeah?' The pilot replied.

'Did you contact the Torchbearer air control?'

'Funnily enough, no,' Atlas replied. 'The convoy leader said that the long range communications had been broken for some time. He gave me clearance.'

'That's a little odd, isn't it?' Vivian said.

'Not as much as you'd think,' Zero said. 'A small clan like torchbearers doesn't have the same resources we do. It's not unheard of for them to be unable to repair transmitters and the like for some time.'

'I guess we have it easy in Aspertias,' Elesa mused.

'I always wondered about that,' Gigolo grunted. 'Why are we even allies with them if they aren't big enough to repair a damn transmitter?'

'Because,' Vivian replied, 'With our help, they will grow big, and then they'll remember us as the ones who helped them when they were weak.'

'Still seems pointless,' Gigolo grumbled.

The radio suddenly blared into life. 'Alert! We have come under attack from an unknown clan!' cried the Torchbearer leader.

'What is your status?' Zero asked, attentive.

'We've held them off, but with heavy casualties. They use energy swords, seemingly exclusively, but are very weak- they have no shields, and seem to die instantly.'

'That's odd,' Vivian said, curious.

'We're coming to reinforce you,' Zero said. He pointed to Atlas. 'You and Elesa, guard the pelican. Rest of you, with me.' He ran out of the back of the aircraft. Vivian sprinted after him, aware of Gigolo and Midori behind her. Zero ran across the landing pad and into the base.

'They're still at the bottom,' Vivian said, panting slightly.

'Where is the elevator?' Zero asked.

'Just down there-' Vivian stopped abruptly. Three Spartans stood in the hallway, their armor black, and energy swords held in their hands. They looked straight at the squad for a moment, and then charged all at once. Immediately Vivian's DMR was in her hands. Without thinking she fired at the lead Spartan. The bullet struck its

head and it fell to the floor. Zero fired a heartbeat later, hitting the second spartan.

The third black spartan sprinted on, undeterred by the deaths of its comrades. It ran faster than any Vivian had seen before, so fast that she was unable to bring her rifle to bear on it. The energy sword flashed towards her, an arc of plasma death.

Abruptly the sword stopped, and then fell back as its owner collapsed. Vivian started to breathe again.

'You're welcome,' she heard Gigolo say. Turning, she could see him reloading his shotgun, his smug smile visible through his clear visor.

'More from behind!' cried Midori. Vivian spun to see another group of the black Spartans sprinting towards them at inhuman speeds. She brought her DMR up and began picking them off as they ran. Zero did likewise, while Midori opened fire with her assault rifle.

'There's too many!' Gigolo shouted.

'Fall back!' Zero cried. 'Into the core room!' Vivian turned and began to run the other way. She spun into the core room. Gigolo followed her, panting. Midori and Zero both ran backwards into the room, guns blazing. Hurriedly Vivian heaved the door closed. The sound of swords hitting metal reverberated through the blue lit chamber.

'Is there another way out?' Zero asked.

'Yes, on the ceiling,' Vivian said. She brought the map of the facility up in her HUD. 'We should be able to get back to the pelican, avoiding most of the black Spartans.'

'Hey, Zero?' Gigolo called.

'What?' Zero snapped, irritably.

'Look at the core.' Vivian turned. The core was usually a blue, cylindrical machine, covered in whirring lights. The Torchbearer's core was totally changed. It was covered in black slime, and seemed deformed, twisted from its usual shape.

'What the hell is that?' Vivian wondered aloud.

'We should blow it.' Gigolo said.

'What- are you crazy? The torchbearers are our allies!' shouted Zero.

'I agree, Zero,' Vivian said. 'Something odd has happened. The core needs to regenerate.' Zero clenched his fists.

'Fine. Midori, blow it.' Midori nodded, and pulled her laser out. 'Be ready to run,' Zero ordered. The laser charged, and then fired with a searing red light. The core seemed to deflate, and then blew in a small explosion. Vivian glanced at Zero, who nodded. She turned and led the way out of the facility.

-5-

As darkness fell, Atlas walked into the cargo compartment of the pelican, yawning. Midori looked at him, alarmed.

'Shouldn't you be flying?' she asked.

'Nah, the autopilot has it covered.' He yawned again. 'And I'm tired as hell.'

'You can nap later,' Zero said. 'We're all going straight to see Meier.'

'Why? I need a rest,' Gigolo complained.

'Because Meier needs to know about what happened back there at Torchbearer base. Those Spartans weren't right.'

'To hell with that,' Atlas said. 'So what, they had some exotic armor mods on. Who cares? We beat them fine.'

'You can't get mods which lower shield strength, let alone remove them,' Vivian said.

'So why do we,' Gigolo said, gesturing to everyone, 'Have to come as well? Can't you tell Meier this yourself?'

'You're coming, and that is final,' Zero ordered. Gigolo groaned loudly.

A loud thump indicated that the pelican had landed safely. The rear door opened and Zero walked out briskly. The rest of the squad followed him.

Zero strode confidently into the terminal, and made for the elevators. Getting more irritated, Atlas followed him in. The squad all squeezed silently into one of the cars.

When the elevator arrived at the ops room, Atlas shuffled out, doing his best to ignore the bemused stares of the people working. Zero pushed past him and walked determinedly towards the briefing room. With a groan, Gigolo followed him. Atlas and the rest walked after, trying to look as small as possible.

As Zero approached the briefing room, Meier walked out. He stopped when he saw Zero and the rest of the squad, a look of slight confusion on his face, which quickly turned to annoyance.

'What are you doing here?' He demanded.

'I have something of utmost importance to tell you,' Zero said firmly.

'And did they all have to be here to hear you tell me this?' Meier asked, gesturing at the assembled Spartans.

'I wanted their corroboration. What I have to tell you may be hard to believe,' Zero said flatly.

'Oh really?' Meier sighed. 'Proceed.'

'At the Torchbearer base we were attacked by a group of black armored Spartans wielding exclusively energy swords,' Zero began.

'Many clans use energy swords and many have black armor. I fail to see-'

'Please, sir,' Zero said, interrupting. Meier's face darkened, but he kept silent.

'These Spartans were odd, in that they had no shields and had extremely weak armor- they died in one or a couple of shots. They also ran abnormally fast- faster than any spartan should be able to.'

'So? They had some exotic armor modifications. Perhaps they were from the south, they do that kind of thing there.'

'I'm certain if you checked, you would see that no such armor modifications are available anywhere in the world.'

'Right.' Meier rubbed his forehead. 'So, you're telling me that you got attacked by some Spartans using some homemade, or new, or secret armor mods. Of what relevance is this? Surely you should have brought this up with intelligence, heck, even engineering. Why tell me?' Meier shook his head. 'Nothing went wrong this time, somehow. You all made it back, and we assume that the Torchbearer's were pleased with your performance. Their communications have been down all day. So why don't you all just piss off somewhere, and let me get back to my work?'

Meier made to move past the squad. Zero stepped in his path.

'Sir, there was something weird about the black Spartans. They didn't seem quite human. And the Torchbearer core- it was covered in some black substance.'

Meier paused. He pointed at Gigolo. 'You, soldier. Is this true?'

Gigolo was silent for a moment. Then he spoke. 'No.'

Meier turned to Zero. 'Look. Up until now I've been having a remarkably good day, which is why I've indulged your little game. But I am fast running out of patience. So either you get out of my sight, or so help me I will discipline you so hard you won't be out on another mission for a month. Do I make myself clear?'

Zero nodded. He turned and walked out of the ops center without another word. Vivian strode after him, not looking at Meier. The general watched her go, a frown on his face. He turned to the rest of the squad. 'You are dismissed.' He spun on his heel and walked away. The remaining Spartans shared a look, and made for the elevator.

Atlas let out a deep breath as soon as he was in the elevator.

'I need a drink,' he said. 'Gigolo, you want to come?'

'I'll pass,' Gigolo said. I gotta get some sleep.'

'Suit yourself.' Atlas turned to Midori. 'You want to come along?'

'I think I could do with a drink,' Midori replied.

'I'll come as well,' Elesa said. 'Seeing as he isn't coming.' She nodded towards Gigolo.

'You wound me!' He said, before laughing meanly. The elevator stopped at the apartment level. 'See you later,' he said, and walked away.

'We'll meet up in 10 minutes,' Atlas said. He left the two girls and quickly changed out of his armor and into some comfortable clothes. After freshening himself up, he made his way to Harry's bar. Elesa was already there, sitting at a table in the quieter area of the bar. Atlas caught her eye and smiled at her. She made a thin smile in return.

'So,' Atlas said, sitting at the table, 'Midori tells me that you two go way back.' He smiled invitingly.

'I guess you could say that,' Elesa said quietly.

'How did you two meet? Were you in a squad together?'

'Yeah...' Elesa stared into her drink. Atlas sighed inwardly. He liked Elesa- she was pretty, with mid length brown hair and large blue eyes, and from what little he'd seen of her she was fun to be around- but he despaired of ever getting a chance to really talk to her. Atlas very rarely saw her alone- as far as he could see she only really liked spending time with Midori, and sometimes Vivian.

'I have to say, I am really jealous of your skill with rifles.' Atlas searched for something to get a conversation going. 'Midori tells me you regularly score in the top 5 in the clan for sniping skill.'

'Why would you be jealous?' Elesa asked. She wasn't looking at Atlas, instead playing with her drink. 'You're one of the best combat pilots.'

Atlas raised his hands, smiling. 'You flatter me. I'd say that being a good pilot is easier than becoming a sniper of your skill level.'

'If you say so.' Elesa took a sip from her drink, and then returned to staring quietly into it. Atlas sighed again. It was frustrating, trying to talk to someone who just didn't seem to be interested, no matter what he said. Most people liked Atlas, so it was a shock to see someone so apathetic.

'Sorry for keeping you waiting!' Atlas turned to see Midori arrive. She pulled a chair at the table and sat down.

'Hey babe,' Atlas said, smiling.

'You okay Elesa?' Midori asked.

'I'm fine,' Elesa said. She smiled weakly at Midori.

'Atlas hasn't been bullying you has he?' Midori asked, concerned.

'Hey!' Atlas cried.

'No.' Elesa shook her head, not meeting anyone's eyes.

'Just kidding,' Midori said. 'Elesa here clams up in places like this.' Elesa raised her eyes to glare at Midori, but said nothing.

'So, what were those black Spartans like? Neither of us saw them, remember?' Atlas asked.

'Odd. I mean, I'm hardly the right person to ask for a fact file about them. You'd be better off asking Vivian.'

'But what did you,' Atlas emphasized the word, 'think about them?'

Midori bit her lip. 'Well, I dunno. They had some pretty weird armor mods. You heard what Zero said to Meier. Like nothing we've seen before.'

'So do you reckon they're a clan from down south?'

'Probably,' Midori said. Her eyes widened. 'Gosh, you don't think they're some kind of invasion force, do you?'

'It's possible. I've heard that they form bigger alliances down south than they do here. One might have decided to attack us, gain more territory.'

'Why would they attack the Torchbearers?' asked Elesa. Atlas almost jumped at her voice; he had already almost forgotten she was there.

'That's a good point sweetie,' Midori said. 'Surely they'd try to gain a foothold in Nasces first.'

'They might have. I mean, it's not like our intelligence is particularly good, anyway. There's no guarantee we'd have heard about it, all the way up here,' said Atlas.

Atlas thought about it. It didn't seem too likely to him. A full scale invasion was, while possible, impractical. Because no-one ever died, the only way to conquer a clan was to essentially camp on their respawn points, killing them over and over again until they gave up and surrendered. It was very uncommon among the larger clans, as doing so required far more troops than the enemy side had, and it could take a very long time to wear the enemy down to the point of surrender. On top of that, you couldn't destroy the enemy core either, as doing so would prevent you from attacking for two days.

Elesa spoke. 'Do you want me to get you some drinks?'

'Thanks. I'll take a coke,' Midori said.

'Same for me,' Atlas added. Elesa nodded and walked to the bar. Atlas turned to Midori, and sighed.

'I really wish she would just talk more,' He said.

'She talks to me,' Midori said. 'I don't know why she never seems to talk with anyone else.' Midori glanced at Atlas, worried. 'You don't think less of her for it, do you?'

'Of course not,' Atlas replied, almost offended.

'She's a really nice person,' Midori said, not seeming to hear. 'She gets a lot of teasing from Gigolo. She probably assumes that you're out to do the same.'

'Why would she assume that?' Atlas asked, now offended. 'Unlike Gigolo, I don't take pleasure in aggravating people.'

'You hang out with him a lot. People assume that you are similar to him until they get to know you.' Midori patted his arm. 'Give it some time. She'll open up to you, I'm sure.'

Elesa returned to the table. Atlas studied her, trying to work out if she had heard any of the conversation. She looked back at him, her expression neutral.

'What do you think about these black Spartans then?' Midori asked Elesa.

'Ask Zero. He'll know.'

Atlas raised his eyebrows. 'Zero doesn't know as much as you think he does.'

Elesa raised her head and looked straight at him, her face expressionless. Atlas shifted uncomfortably.

'I think he knows more than you give him credit for,' she said.

Midori sighed loudly. 'Why does every conversation any of us have seem to turn to a discussion about Zero? Why can't we, just for once, talk about something else?' Elesa looked away. Atlas turned to see Midori glaring at him.

'What did I do?' he asked.

'You say you're nothing like Gigolo, yet at every opportunity you slag Zero off. Give it a rest already!'

'Fine, fine. Whatever.' Atlas took a drink from his glass, not meeting either of the girls eyes. He felt it was going to be a long night.

3. The short road to disillusionment (3)

Vivian and Zero rode the lift down to their apartments in an uncomfortable silence. Zero was silently fuming in his head. After a while Vivian broke the silence.

'Are you still up for coming to my place tonight?' she asked. Zero's head jerked up, as if he had forgotten she was even there.

'Oh. Yes, if you don't mind,' he said.

'I think I still have some of your clothes at my apartment, so you don't have to go back to yours, if you don't want to.'

'That would be nice. Thank you.' Zero gazed vacantly at the elevator door. It opened.

'Come on then,' Vivian said. She grabbed Zero by the arm and pulled him out of the elevator. He followed for a few steps, and then stopped.

'Sorry. I have... a lot on my mind.' Zero hesitated.

'Why don't you discuss it with me, then? Better than stewing alone in your apartment.' Vivian held out her hand.

'Okay. Sure.' Zero took her hand, and she began to lead him onwards.

'So,' Vivian said, trying to make conversation. 'What do you think of those black Spartans?'

'Them? Like nothing I've ever seen before.'

'Like nothing I've seen either, though that goes without saying, I suppose.' Vivian laughed hesitantly, and then stopped when Zero remained silent. She sighed.

'They didn't seem to be very effective. They'd probably be better in larger numbers, and in close quarters,' Zero said, absentmindedly.

'Yes, I noticed that as well,' Vivian said. She stopped by her apartment door, and opened it. Her apartment was spacious for a soldier's rooms, a mark of her long service. Doors led off to a bedroom and a bathroom, and a kitchenette stood in the corner. A table for four lay between it and the door. A sofa and a television sat against the other wall.

'Their armor modifications made no sense.' Vivian led Zero into the apartment. She walked into her bedroom, and turned around. Zero was still stood by the door.

'Damn it Zero, snap out of it!' She walked over and pulled him into the bathroom. 'It's Gigolo, isn't it? That's what you're thinking about.' Zero started, guiltily. For the first time he seemed properly aware of his surroundings.

'It's just-'

'No!' Vivian grabbed his shoulders. 'Shower. Get changed. I'll put some clothes under the door.'

'Okay...'

Vivian walked back out of the bathroom.

Zero showered slowly, thinking about other things. He seemed stuck on one problem. The black Spartans were a distraction, irrelevant now. He had to sort out Gigolo. With a start Zero realized that he was obsessing over Gigolo. Zero quickly put all thoughts of the other spartan out of his head. It was things like that which had ruined his relationship with Vivian the first time, and he couldn't let it happen again. Eventually Zero finished showering and dressed.

'You took your time,' Vivian said with a smile as he walked out of the bathroom.

'I seemed to have forgotten what a good shower felt like,' Zero said, returning her smile.

Vivian laughed. 'It seems like it loosened you up a bit as well.' Zero nodded. 'Take a seat, please.'

Zero sat down, studying Vivian. She never seemed to age, like he had. She still looked as young and vibrant as the day they had first met, over 30 years ago. Zero caressed her body with his gaze, taking in her strong yet slim figure, her shoulder length brown hair, and her stern yet pretty face.

'You're staring again,' Vivian said, startling Zero.

'I don't mind,' Vivian said, a hint of a smile on her lips. 'After all, its nothing that you haven't seen before.'

Zero felt a pain in his chest. And nothing that I'll ever see again. No matter, though.

'Did you cook tonight?' he asked, trying to change the topic.

'Uh-huh. I know how much you like my food.' Vivian placed a plate filled with hot food in front of Zero, then set one for herself. She walked into the kitchen to collect the cutlery.

'I'm sorry.' Zero said when she came back. 'Very sorry.'

'What for?' Vivian asked, putting cutlery on the table.

'For not being quite here. Just now, I mean.'

'Don't worry about it. I know how hard Gigolo is being on you.' Vivian sat opposite Zero. 'Please, start.'

Zero picked up a sausage and tried a bite. It was really very good. Another quality of Vivian's that hadn't aged. He sighed. 'It doesn't excuse my behavior.'

'I just said don't worry about it,' Vivian replied, exasperated. 'Anyway, lets change the topic.'

'Um. Well, I hear Meier is looking to wrestle some more power from

June,' Zero said.

'We won't let him. She defers to him on military matters, but when it comes to running this clan, everyone knows that June is a better president.'

'I don't know about that. Since she became president out situation with the Scorpions has only deteriorated.'

'It was going to happen anyway. The Scorpions don't bother with diplomacy.'

'That may be so, but-' Zero stopped mid sentence. Vivian looked at him.

'Is something wrong?' she asked.

'Who am I fooling?' Zero asked. 'I don't care about this sort of crap anymore. I want to talk about us.'

'Us?' Vivian said the word like it was an oath.

'Yes, us. What happened to us? Why? Where are we going?'

'Zero,' Vivian began. Zero tried to speak again but she shushed him. 'Zero, you manage to be so smart, yet you can never understand anyone else. I've moved on.'

'Then why did you invite me here, after all these years?'

'Because I wanted to see if you had as well. Until you do, you can never be happy.'

'That's...' Zero's voice faltered. Try as he might, he couldn't help but see the truth in what Vivian said. He couldn't rationalize his actions to himself any other way. 'I'm sorry. Again.' Zero put his cutlery down, and stood up. 'This was a mistake. Mine, as well as yours. Thank you for the meal.' He turned to leave.

'Zero...' Vivian called after him.

'Yes?' he answered, turning around in front of the door.

'You used to be the most amazing person I knew. You still are.'

'How?'

'You amaze me with how stupid you can be. Leave, I won't stop you.'

Zero stood at the door, silent.

'Go, then, if you're so eager to leave. Come back when you know how to laugh again.' Silently, Zero turned and walked away from Vivian.

-7-

Elesa awoke to a room of silence. It was how she liked it. She

quietly got out of bed and tiptoed to the shower. A quick glance around the living room showed no evidence of any of Atlas's clothes scattered anywhere. He must have not come back with Midori, then.

After showering, Elesa walked over to Midori's room and poked her head round the door. Her best friend was still asleep, the covers in a knot over her body.

Elesa left the apartment she shared with Midori, quietly locking it, and then walked towards the elevator. At this time in the morning very few people were awake, and the base was near silent. Elesa savored the moment, knowing that in an hour more people would be awake and going about their business. She got in the elevator and selected the practice center.

The doors opened a short time later and Elesa walked into the foyer of the practice center. The man on the desk nodded to her; he knew not to talk to her in the mornings. She picked up a cereal bar from the dispenser and walked into the changing room.

Once kitted up in her armor, Elesa went to the target range. For half an hour she practiced sniping targets; through walls, moving, in vehicles. A few early risers came to watch her in silence. Like the man on the desk, they knew her well enough not to try and talk to her.

After some time more people started to trickle into the practice center, some of them people who knew Elesa well. As she finished her practice, a vague friend sent her a message asking her to join his combat practice. With nothing better to do, she accepted.

She ended up in a group of 16 Spartans, including herself. Two people volunteered themselves as leaders, and picked randomly to decide who was on each team. Elesa ended up on the red team. Silently she followed them into the game room.

The game room had been set up to provide a balanced map based around a jungle, meant to simulate fighting in the Eastern continent, not that anyone ever expected to go there. Two ruined stone forts stood at opposite ends of the room, holding each team's flag. The game was started, and five of the red team Spartans went to try and capture the flag, while Elesa and two others hung back to defend. Elesa found a spot perched in a tree where she could see two of the four entrances to the base.

After a few minutes, she spotted movement. A blue team spartan moved cautiously through the waist high scrub between the jungle and the base. He looked around suspiciously, as if expecting to be shot at any moment. After a few seconds, he seemed to relax slightly, and sprinted the rest of the distance to cover. Then what Elesa had been hoping to happen happened- three more Spartans moved out of the Jungle and towards the base. They jogged, obviously believing that they were safe.

Elesa held for a moment, to make sure that there weren't any more, and then fired at the spartan in cover. He was hidden by a thin stone wall at an angle to where Elesa was crouched, which provided him little cover from the bullet. He silently crumpled to the floor. Elesa then quickly aligned her sights on another spartan, but he had

been warned. He dropped to the floor as the shot passed over his head. His two squad mates dived for cover in the grass. Elesa clenched her teeth, and then fired again, hitting the prone spartan.

The other two Spartans began firing back at her. One opened fire with a Battle Rifle, spraying her general direction. Elesa took a bullet straight to the chest. He shield absorbed the damage, but the forced overbalanced her and she tumbled back off the tree. Her hand shot out to grab hold of a branch, and she managed to hold on. She suddenly saw the other spartan- a female- targeting her with a sniper rifle. Abruptly she let go of the branch and fell to the floor, landing awkwardly. Ignoring the pain in her leg she rolled to her feet and aimed her sniper rifle at the female spartan. Before she could fire the other spartan managed to get in a shot. The force of the bullets sent her shot wildly off target- and by sheer chance hit the male spartan in the chest. He staggered back, and Elesa quickly finished him off with her DMR.

The final blue spartan seemed to decide she was outmatched and sprinted into the base. Elesa began to run after her, hobbled by the pain in her leg. As she ran she heard an explosion from a short distance away. Her HUD informed her that three of her squad mates had just been killed.

The inside of the base was dark and gloomy. Elesa jogged after the female spartan, knowing all too well that she probably wouldn't be able to catch up. So it was a surprise when a blue shape jumped out at her from a dark corner. A knife slashed at her face, and caught her on the side of the head. With a cry Elesa fell back, avoiding the back swing. With a curse the other spartan jumped at her, but Elesa rolled out of the way. She fired her sniper rifle blindly. The bullet missed the other spartan by a long way, but shocked her- she turned and fled again. Suddenly static crackled in Elesa's ear.

'Elesa, we need you at the west entrance- we're fighting off an attack from 4 Spartans- retreating-'

Elesa shook her head. She wasn't going to give up. She pulled herself up and followed the blue spartan. However, she hadn't seen where her enemy had gone- and she didn't know her way around the base.

After a couple of seconds, her HUD informed her that their flag had been taken. She sprinted to the central base area to see other blue Spartans running out with the red flag. Then she heard a noise behind her, and the world went dark.

As always, there was a moment of darkness- it always seemed like just a moment, regardless of how long it was in real time- and she awoke in the respawn chamber. Sighing, she stepped out and checked the clock. Only 40 seconds had passed, so she must have been one of the last on her team left alive. Elesa stepped out into the spawn room, seeing her team standing in front of her. They turned to face her, mid conversation. Elesa froze. She knew what they would say- they would be disappointed in her for failing to help; for being defeated, for many things-

'You did great out there!' one of the Spartans said. Elesa was caught off guard.

What? But I didn't-

'It takes rare talent to go 3-1 on a permadeath game,' another said approvingly.

_Why are they congratulating me? _

'I hope you'll be staying on our team for the next couple of games,' The first spartan said. Elesa nodded cautiously. 'Great thing! We'll meet up in 5.' The group scattered, leaving Elesa alone.

Maybe... maybe they actually did think I did well? Elesa shook her head. _Then they're idiots. I could have done far better._ Elesa walked to the nearby vending machine. _Allowing myself to be congratulated by them will only make me weaker. _

She pushed the button and a coffee fell into the slot. She pulled the straw out and sucked it thoughtfully through her visor.

'Hey there Elesa,' a voice said behind her. She jumped, then turned around angrily. Gigolo was standing in front of her, a smile on his face. 'Fancy seeing you here, hmm?'

'What do you want?' Elesa said coldly.

'Must I have a reason for coming to see you?'

'You came to see me?' Elesa kept her voice calm. Gigolo squinted at her, trying to see her face through her blanked visor.

'I was going to practice anyway, but when I saw you were here I thought I'd come by and say hello. Which team are you on?'

'Blue,' She lied.

'Oh really?' Gigolo looked away for a moment. His eyes crossed. 'Looks like they have a free slot.' His eyes refocused, but Elesa had thrown her coffee in the bin and was stalking away.

By the time Gigolo realized he had been tricked, it was too late. He stood in the Blue team, occasionally glaring at Elesa. She ignored him. A couple of the other Spartans looked at them concernedly.

The teams agreed on a 12 on 12 deathmatch game, with unlimited lives. They got onto the rotation for one of the new maps, resembling a space station, broken down the middle. Elesa's team spawned at their base, and quickly drew up a game plan. Two teams of 4 would go on the hunt, with the remaining 4 splitting off and going alone. Because of her skills at working alone, Elesa was put into the latter group.

The game began and Elesa sprinted to the side of the starting area. She clambered through the field at the edge of the hangar and began to climb up the outside of the space station. After a few minutes, she found a suitable position and pulled out her rifle. From her vantage point, Elesa could see a dozen gantries and walkways, where any enemies would be totally exposed to her attacks.

The score stayed fairly even, with neither team gaining any advantage in the opening minutes. Elesa soon spotted a pair of Blues sprinting

through one of the covered walkways. She aimed, paused, and then fired. Her bullet shattered the glass, and took the lead spartan in the head. The second one leaped for cover immediately, and managed to hide behind a strut. Elesa tracked upwards and fired at the join in the center of the walkway twice. The structure lurched, and the blue fell out of his cover. Elesa's last shot took him in the chest and he fell out of the walkway to his death.

Knowing that by now she would be attracting attention, Elesa prepared to move. She packed up her rifle and was about to leave when she saw a flicker. She jumped back as Gigolo decloaked and fired his shotgun at her. The blast took her in the chest and she fell onto a slanted edge of the station. Desperately, she pulled her knife and swung. She felt a sudden resistance and saw that she had caught Gigolo in the leg. With a yell he fell after her, arms flailing wildly. Elesa tumbled over the edge, missing any handholds. Suddenly she jerked to a stop, and saw that Gigolo had caught a ledge with one hand. Her knife was all that was holding her up, buried in his leg.

He swung his shotgun down and aimed at her. She knew that he could take as much time as he liked- she was trapped. Then the strut he was holding onto lurched and snapped. Elesa seized the moment and pulled herself up onto his chest. She wrenched her knife free and stabbed him in the neck as he fired at her chest. She blanked out as her body fell towards the bottom of the arena.

Elesa awoke a subjective instant later, although in reality 20 seconds had passed. She stepped out of the spawner, and then had to dive for cover as she entered the middle of a firefight.

'Elesa! Quick, get over here!.' One of the red teams was camped behind the wreckage of a saber interceptor, exchanging fire with 5 or so blues. She sprinted to the ruined spaceplane and vaulted into cover, feeling impacts as a handful of bullets hit her back. Her shields held, though.

'You have a sniper, right? Give us some breathing space!'. The leader of the red squad gestured towards the back of the hangar. 'There's a few good spots back there for you to fire from. Go, quickly!' Elesa nodded sharply, then sprinted away from the firefight. A few stray bullets passed her, but it seemed as though no-one was firing at her; instead focusing on the squad. She leaped up a flight of stairs and slid into cover on a maintenance walkway. Her heart was beating too fast. Elesa took a moment to calm down, then pulled her sniper rifle out and quickly targeted the enemies. They seemed to be hiding behind a pelican. Scanning them, she realized that she wouldn't be able to get more than one of them before they realized where she was, and hid. Which one should I take?

Then she noticed a decal on the armor of one of the enemies. Smiling to herself, she took aim, and fired.

Gigolo's indignant scream of rage was enough to brighten her day. She allowed herself a moment of congratulation, and then tried to pick another target. Her assumption had been correct- they were hiding themselves from her. A couple of shots buzzed up and took her in the chest. She broke cover and ran back to the stairway, but a shot took her in the leg. She staggered, and then her world went black.

She awoke immediately, and set off again.

Over the next 45 minutes Elesa killed Gigolo 17 times, often multiple times without dying. She told herself she wasn't actively trying to get him, but she found herself drawn towards him without thinking. And she found it fun to kill him. In the same period, he killed her 5 times.

The game ended when the score reached 400 kills on her side, to 320 on the other side. They blinked into the lobby again, where they shook hands with their opponents. Gigolo avoided her. As Elesa made to leave, though, he caught up to her.

'What the hell was that for!' he shouted, grabbing her. She pulled his arm off her and stared at him. Her visor was still blanked out, so he was left squinting, trying to see her face.

'What do you mean?' she asked calmly.

'You purposefully hunting me down back there! You killed me far more than you killed anyone else.'

'I can't help it if you're an easy target.' Elesa turned and began walking again.

'Wait!' Gigolo grabbed her arm. She froze, and turned to face him angrily. 'Take off your helmet.'

'What?' Elesa asked. Gigolo grabbed her head and pulled the helmet off. 'Hey!' Then he kissed her.

The kiss lasted half a second before she punched him in the face. He fell back with a cry and she kicked him in the groin. She pulled her helmet out of his unresisting grip and walked away fast.

'Elesa!' Gigolo yelled. 'I'm sorry! I don't know what came over me!' She ignored his cries. 'Elesa! Please don't tell anyone!'

She turned around, and this time he could see her anger plainly. 'If you didn't want anyone to know, you shouldn't have done it.' She spat at him. 'Asshole.' She walked beyond a corner and disappeared.

4. Fools and the Fools who follow them (1)

Fools and the Fools who Follow Them

Gigolo was worried. If Elesa planned on telling someone about what he had done, it could be very bad for him. June, the president, was known to be a great feminist, and looked dimly on men forcing themselves on women. Normally, it would only be enough to get him a verbal reprimand, and probably not even from June herself, but with Decarabia teetering on the edge, it could be the last straw to get him kicked from the clan. He had to shut her up somehow.

Violence or threats wouldn't work- that would only land him in deeper trouble. Besides, he wasn't sure he could threaten her at all. He didn't have anything to use against her, besides a few rumors from men she had rejected that she was a lesbian. Not that that would worry her. He could plead with her, but she hated him anyway. He'd have to find something to offer her, something that she wanted. It

pained him to admit it, but he depended on her right now. He couldn't get kicked from the clan, not now that he was getting so close to removing Zero.

A message interrupted his thoughts. It was from Vivian. He opened it, and her image flickered into his vision.

'Message to all of Decarabia squad. Meet at the hangar immediately. We have an assignment. Details when you get here.' The image disappeared. Gigolo frowned. This was unexpected. Normally they got a bit more warning before being sent out on a mission.

He stood up from his bed and dressed in his armor. He took his weapons from their stands and jogged to the elevator.

At the hangar he arrived to see everyone but Zero already there. Vivian nodded to him when she saw him. Atlas waved.

'Where's our esteemed leader?' Gigolo asked Atlas.

'Dunno. Haven't seen him since Meier gave him a bollocking earlier.'

'He's just there,' Vivian said, frowning at Gigolo. She pointed to the elevator, and Gigolo saw Zero jogging towards them. Zero slowed when he reached Vivian.

'Brief them,' he said, then walked into the pelican.

Vivian turned to watch him go, then looked back to the assembled Spartans. Gigolo, who was watching carefully, thought she seemed worried.

'Our mission is simple recon. Benzene, who we have an alliance with, have stopped responding to messages recently. We're going to check that everything is okay with them.'

'How recently?' Midori asked.

'Within the past 12 hours.' Vivian replied. 'Normally we wouldn't send a recon team until a few days have passed, but as the Torchbearers have also been out of contact, ops decided that it was better to play it safe. If it's some kind of sabotage by the Scorpions, we have to know.' Vivian paused. 'Any other questions?' Everyone shook their heads. 'Good. We leave immediately.'

The squad moved into the Pelican. Gigolo tried to avoid meeting Elesa's gaze. He could tell she was still angry with him; she kept glaring at him. He could only hope that she hadn't told anyone.

'Hey, man,' Atlas said, pausing as he walked to the cabin. 'What's up with Elesa? She keeps shooting daggers at you.'

'I'll tell you later,' Gigolo said.

'Suit yourself,' Atlas responded, shrugging. He walked into the cockpit. Gigolo watched him go with a feeling of envy. He was the only man in the squad who didn't have a girlfriend. It must be so much easier for Atlas, being in a stable relationship.

The pelican took off and flew into the clear air. They touched down about 15 minutes later, at the Benzene base. The base was a hexagonal compound, with squat buildings inside, none more than 5 stories high. As clans went, Benzene was pretty low on the tech scale. They didn't have the sort of equipment and skill that Aspertias had.

'I tried to open communications repeatedly with them,' Atlas was saying. 'I got nothing. Plus, this place looks deserted from the outside.'

The pelican had landed near the gate to the compound, a few hundred meters from the hangar.

'Check the Hangar,' Zero ordered. 'If they evacuated, their birds will be gone.' He turned to Gigolo. 'You and Midori stay here.'

'Shouldn't I be staying-' Atlas begun, but was cut off by Zero.

'Don't question my orders.' Atlas nodded sulkily. 'Let's go.' The four of them set off, leaving Gigolo and Midori behind.

'Clever,' Midori remarked when they had disappeared.

'How?' Gigolo asked her.

'He wants someone he can trust at the pelican, and as long as Atlas isn't here, nobody can leave.'

'I thought he trusted Atlas,' Gigolo said, surprised.

'He's cleverer than you give him credit for,' Midori replied. She sat heavily on the rear of the pelican, and refused to talk further.

2

Vivian led the way to the hangar, following the map in her HUD. Nobody stopped them, or attacked them. The base seemed deserted. They jogged in silence, none of them particularly wanting to talk to each other. After a few hundred meters, they reached one of the struts holding the elevated hangar open. Elesa scanned the inside quickly. When she gave the all clear the rest of the squad entered and began climbing the stairs.

At the top the stairs opened out to reveal the hangar, full of aircraft bearing the Benzene insignia.

'So they didn't evacuate,' Vivian said. 'At least, not by air.'

'We could check the car pool if you want to be certain,' Atlas said. 'But I don't think we'll need to.' He gestured to an aircraft at the end of the hangar. 'That's a Scorpion Pelican.'

'So the Scorpion's attacked? That's it?' Vivian asked.

'No.' Zero looked around the hangar slowly. 'This isn't an attack. For one thing, there's only the one pelican. How could a single

dropship of troops take out an entire clan?'

'This whole situation feels odd,' Atlas said. 'I mean- when have you ever seen a totally empty base?'

'That's true,' Vivian said. 'If they'd been beaten, we'd either still be seeing Scorpion troops around, or some of the Benzene would have respawned already. Where is everyone?'

'No point standing around,' Zero said. 'We'll check out the Scorpion pelican, then head to the motor pool. Move!' He began to jog towards the other end of the hangar.

3

Gigolo was getting frustrated. Midori was being stubbornly uncommunicative, and he was bored. Zero leaving him at the pelican was a petty and stupid move- he was the squad's infiltrator, for god's sake- but also a good way of getting back at him. He glanced at Midori again. If only it was anyone else but her. Though not Elesa. Or Zero. Or Vivian. _ He sighed. Most times Atlas seemed to be his only friend in this hellhole of a squad. The rest seemed to always take Zero's side over his, even when Zero was blatantly in the wrong.

Suddenly he spotted movement and was on his feet in a second.

'What- where?' Midori asked, also on her feet.

'On the bridge to the left. 4 Spartans- Scorpions.'

'I see them.' Midori glanced to the side. 'Zero? We've spotted 4 Scorpion Spartans. They haven't seen us yet.' There was a pause. 'They don't seem to be coming this way.' She paused again.

Gigolo suddenly heard the crackle of distant gunfire. He zoomed in his vision on the Spartans and saw that one of them was firing his gun into the building they had just left. He tapped Midori on the arm and pointed.

'Hold up, Midori said. She leaned forwards. 'They're firing at something. Can't see what. No, there's no return fire.' She stopped. 'That's odd.'

4

The Scorpion pelican looked as though it had been left in a hurry. The rear door was open, with the lights still on and the engine idling. There were no guards, and no sign of where the squad had gone.

As Zero chatted to Midori on the radio, Vivian and Atlas gave the interior a once over. There was no equipment left lying around, but the door to the cabin was open and the controls unlocked.

'I could just take this, right now,' Atlas said. 'I mean, how hard would it be for them to lock the controls? They must have left in a real hurry.'

'I don't know about that,' Vivian replied. 'If they'd been under

attack it would show. I think they just didn't expect anyone else to be around. Which is still weird.' Vivian rubbed her arms slowly.

'Say, are there any records of this happening before? Of clans disappearing without a trace?'

Atlas shrugged. 'I wouldn't know about that. You're the one who knows this stuff.'

'Worth a try,' Vivian said. She sighed heavily. 'Then I haven't a clue what went on here.'

'We need more information,' Atlas said. 'Just as soon as our esteemed leader gets off the radio we can go and check the rest of the base out.'

Vivian looked straight at him. 'You and Gigolo are just the same,' She said angrily. 'Too self important to see that you're the reason this squad is having so much trouble. Zero was doing just fine until you lot came along.'

'That's not how the records show it. They show-'

'Quiet!' Zero commanded. Vivian turned to see Elesa and the other Spartan standing at the door to the pelican. 'Midori and Gigolo have seen a squad of Scorpions. We're going to go and find out what they're doing here.' He turned to Vivian. 'Can you plot us a route to the core room?'

'Sure,' Vivian said. She brought up the map in her HUD. 'Head left and out of the hangar.'

5

'We should go and see what they were firing at,' Gigolo said.

'No.' Midori replied. Gigolo sighed, exasperated.

'Come on Midori! We're just sitting here, waiting for our old age to come. We should be out there, finding things out.'

'Well, unless you've lied about your age all this time, you should have at least another 350 years before your old age comes. So we can wait a while longer.'

'Screw it, I'm just going alone.' Gigolo got up and made for the back of the Pelican.

'If Zero hears you've disobeyed orders, he'll find a way to get you kicked out of the clan.' Gigolo stopped. 'And then how will you be able to carry out your grand plan of taking the leadership of the squad from Zero?'

'How do you know about that?' Gigolo asked quietly.

'Oh, come on,' Midori said. 'It's obvious by the way you act around him.' She held up her hands. 'Just so you know, I don't really care who leads this squad, and I'm not getting involved in your petty squabbles. I just wanted to stop you doing something you'd regret.'

'I'd be a far better leader than Zero, and you know it,' Gigolo said. 'The man is an idiot! It's his fault that we keep screwing up, and that none of us are ever going to be promoted to a better squad.:'

'It's your fault you're here, Gigolo, not Zero's.'

'Well,- yeah, but it's his fault I stayed here.' Midori shook her head, then froze.

'What was that?' she asked. 'I saw movement.'

'Huh? What do you- oh, shit.' Gigolo saw a black Spartan, wielding an energy sword, standing 20 meters away from him. It slowly turned to face him. Then it started sprinting at top speed towards him. In a flash Gigolo had his assault rifle out and began firing at the Spartan. 3 bullets dropped it, but more appeared behind.

'Midori, help!' Gigolo shouted. Midori jumped to her feet and ran towards Gigolo. 6 more black Spartans appeared from behind him. She opened fire with her rifle at them, dropping them quickly. She caught a glimpse of movement from the corner of her eye and saw a single black Spartan flanking them. She tried to fire but her weapon clicked uselessly. With no other options she hurled the rifle at the enemy Spartan. It impacted straight in it's chest, dropping it.

Gigolo was still firing away as even more of the black Spartans appeared from nowhere. Panicking, Midori grabbed the closest weapon to hand- her rocket launcher- and used it to club away one of the attacking Spartans. She then hoisted it onto her shoulder and fired a rocket at another black Spartan. The tube rotated, bringing her second shot round, as another Spartan lunged at her. She fired on instinct. The rocket exploded in the Spartan's chest, and then the blast wave blew her to pieces.

6

Zero stopped running as Midori and Gigolo's signs disappeared from his HUD. The rest of his team stopped behind him.

'We just lost our way out,' he said sharply. He turned. 'We're heading back to the scorpion pelican. Now.'

'Why?' Atlas asked. 'It's not as if we need a way out. We can just kill ourselves and respawn back at base when we've found what we need.'

'Something's stopping the Benzene from respawning. That same something could happen to us,' Zero said. 'You're young, Atlas. I can't imagine permanent death sounds very attractive to you right now.'

'You don't know that's what caused it,' Atlas said, unsure.

'All of us here have at least 300 years left to live,' Vivian said. 'You have even more than that. I think we should leave now and come back with more troops- preferably a platoon or two.'

'Fine,' Atlas said. Vivian nodded and began to run back towards the hangar. She'd gone 15 paces when a black spartan jumped out in front

of her, holding a glimmering energy sword.

On instinct she pulled her DMR out and shot it in the head. It collapsed immediately.

'Hostiles!' She shouted.

'More behind,' Elesa said. Vivian heard the sound of gunfire behind and turned to see Elesa finishing off a pair of the black Spartans with her rifle.

'Move it!' Zero shouted, and the squad began running again.

'More behind,' Elesa said again. Gunfire sounded. 'Lots of them,' she added.

'The hangar's just up ahead,' Vivian cried. They burst into the hangar and sprinted for the dropship, losing all semblance of order. Atlas pulled the cockpit door open and thumbed the control for the rear door.

'Get in, now!' He shouted. The rest of the squad dived through the opening as it swung shut behind them. Immediately the sound of swords on metal sounded from beyond it.

'Let's get out of here,' Atlas said, and the Pelican rose up and flew off towards Aspertias base.

7

Vivian wasn't the sort of person who spent much time at all in coffee shops and bars; when she was dating Zero they had mainly been to the handful of restaurants that Aspertias base boasted- the most in the northern continent, not that it meant anything- or had dinners at their apartment.

As far as she knew, Elesa wasn't the coffee shop sort of person either, so it was quite a surprise when she received an invite asking her to meet at the coffee shop, 2 hours after returning from their scouting mission at the Benzene base.

She arrived at the place- it was called Benny's, she noticed- a few minutes early, and saw that Elesa was already there, sitting at a table next to the panoramic windows looking out over the valley, shrouded in darkness. Elesa spotted her and waved her over.

'Sorry for calling you out so late. I need to talk to you,' Elesa said hurriedly, when Vivian had drawn up a seat. 'Gigolo and Midori haven't respawned yet and Zero is being debriefed by Meier so I thought now would be the best time-'

'It's fine, I understand,' Vivian interrupted. Elesa paused, and then nodded.

'It's about what's been going on with Gigolo and Atlas,' She said.

'I thought it might be,' Vivian replied. 'But go on.'

'We need to do something. Get them removed from the squad, if not the

clan.'

'Realistically we'd probably only need to get Gigolo removed,' Vivian said. 'Atlas just follows his lead. He's something of an idiot that way.'

Elesa nodded. 'I don't know what Midori sees in him.' She looked out the window. 'So how would we go about removing Gigolo?'

'I've been in a similar situation before,' Vivian said. 'Before I met Zero- it would have been about 40 years ago, but the rules are the same now as they were then. We need to get everyone in the squad except Gigolo himself to say that they want him to be removed.'

Elesa groaned softly. 'I feared it would be something like that. We'll never get Atlas to agree.'

'He can be made to see sense,' Vivian said. She looked around. 'Hey, how exactly do you go about getting coffee here?'

'Go up to the bar,' Elesa said, gesturing at the bar where a single staff member was wiping some glasses, 'And order. And while you're at it, get me some as well. Black.'

'Of course,' Vivian said. She stood up and walked through the mostly deserted shop to the bar.

Elesa looked out of the window. A seat like this would be hard to get during the day, but at night, with the majority of the clan either asleep, away, or using the nightclubs, they were normally free. She came here several times a week, always at night, to relax and get away from Midori. Although at night, the view wasn't as good- darkness covered the valley, and not much could be seen beyond the moonlight reflected off rivers and snowcapped mountains.

'I got black too. Thought I'd need it.' Vivian sat down again, sliding a cup of coffee over to Elesa. She sipped it appreciatively.

'I think I may be able to convince Midori,' Elesa said. 'She is supposed to be my best friend.'

'She's going out with Atlas, isn't she?' Vivian asked. Elesa nodded. 'Then she may choose to listen to him over you.'

'She'll see sense. She doesn't much like Gigolo anyway- she's said several times how she doesn't like Atlas being friends with him.'

'I hope you're right,' Vivian replied. There was a silence as they both sipped their coffee.

'Zero will agree even if I don't ask him to,' Vivian said. 'So it's just Midori and Atlas we need to convince.'

'Yeah,' Elesa said quietly. Vivian looked at her. She was staring out of the window, a complex expression on her face. Vivian sat quietly. She didn't know Elesa very well, but she knew enough that she would gain nothing by asking Elesa what was up.

'You and Zero,' Elesa said suddenly.

'What about us?' Vivian replied, surprised.

'How did you get together?'

'Oh, that was way back,' Vivian said. 'Must have been- what, 35 years ago? Yes, it was, because I had just turned 30. We were placed in the same squad, and one day we got talking, and we hit it off, and we've been together since. Well-' Vivian's face took on a pained expression- 'It's been difficult for the past 10 years.'

'35 years,' Elesa said with wonder. 'I'm not even that old.'

'Hey, I'm still young,' Vivian said indignantly. 'Why do you ask?'

'No reason really,' Elesa said. 'Just interested.'

Vivian sat and chatted to Elesa for a few minutes before the other woman made her excuses and left. Vivian finished her coffee, and with one last glance out the window, returned to her apartment.

8

'So, fill me in. How did our illustrious leader get us out of that mess?'

Atlas smiled. 'He ran away with his tail between his legs.'

'Not surprising,' Gigolo replied. He stretched his arms, cracking a few joints. Atlas winced. 'Respawning has never really agreed with me,' Gigolo said, seeing his friends expression.

'Me either, but then I'm not normally on the front line,' Atlas replied.

The elevator doors opened, revealing the lobby of the command center. Gigolo and Atlas stepped out of the lift and walked towards the desk. A secretary looked up as they approached.

'May I help you?' She asked.

'Um, yeah,' Gigolo said. 'We're looking to make some inquiries about our squad.'

'Complaints,' Atlas added.

'That too,' Gigolo said, giving Atlas a look. The secretary gave them both a funny look.

'Down the hall,' She said, pointing to the left. 'Second door.' Atlas and Gigolo said their thanks and walked in the direction she had indicated.

'She was totally interested in me,' Gigolo said as soon as they were out of earshot.

'In the same way as you'd be interested in a pile of horse dung.' Atlas replied.

'Shut up,' Gigolo said. 'Like you'd know. You've been out of the game for so long you've forgotten how to pick up a chick.'

'I've been dating Midori for, like, half a year,' Atlas said. 'I think I can still remember how to get a girl.'

Gigolo rolled his eyes. 'This is the one, right?' Atlas nodded. He pushed open the door.

Inside was a small office room, with a desk and a couple of seats opposite. A short man sat behind the computer, gesturing at the screen behind him stood an instantly recognizable man.

'Just who I was looking for,' Meier said, a nasty grin on his face. Then he looked closer at the pair. 'Wait, never mind. You two aren't clever enough to be able to help me. Tell Vivian to come up here when you see her.' Atlas saw Gigolo stiffen as Meier so casually insulted them. He put a hand on his friend's shoulder and tried to look confident.

'Actually, we were here for a reason, sir,' He said.

'No, really?' Meier asked. 'Well, out with it!'

'It's not something you really need to hear...' Atlas trailed off under Meier's gaze. He swallowed. 'We wanted to make a complaint.'

'About your squad leader?' Meier asked. 'Why am I not surprised?'

'Because you also know he's barely capable of looking after himself, let alone an entire squad?' Gigolo said suddenly.

'Why would you...' Meier began. Then he paused. 'No, that would have been before your time.' He shook his head. 'You newbies. If you really want to get rid of Zero, then you need everyone in your squad-except Zero of course- to request him to be removed as well.'

'What! We'll never get that, not with Vivian in the squad!' Gigolo exclaimed.

'Sorry lads, protocol rules,' Meier said. He looked at the two younger Spartans thoughtfully. 'Are you sure you want Zero out?'

'Yes!' Gigolo said impatiently.

'All right,' Meier said. 'Though maybe you should try finding some out about your leader's history before you go trying to kick him out.' With a nod to the clerk behind the desk, he walked out.

'Remember to send Vivian up here,' he said as he left.

Gigolo looked at Atlas. 'Well that's a load of-' Atlas shushed him.

'Not here. Lets go somewhere we can talk about this,' he said.

Tight lipped, Gigolo followed him out of the command center and into

the elevator. Atlas nodded when they were inside.

'How the fuck are we going to get Vivian to agree!' Gigolo shouted.
'This is bullshit!'

'I know, man. No need to shout,' Atlas said. 'Anyway, there are ways.'

'Like what,' Gigolo asked.

'Perhaps if we highlighted Zero's failings to her, she'd come around?' Atlas said.

'You mean if we made him mess up in front of her?' Gigolo nodded. 'I like that.'

'And if we can't get her to come around, I'm sure we can find some other method,' Atlas said.

5. Fools and the Fools who follow them (2)

9

Immediately after respawning, Midori had gone to her apartment and gone to sleep. Sleep, she felt was always the best cure for the general grogginess that came over when you were rebuilt by the respawner machines.

She slept long and well, and was irritated when she was rudely woken up by the sound of the TV in the lounge.

Muttering to herself, she pulled on a gown and walked into the lounge to see Atlas watching the news, his feet up on her coffee table.

'What the hell are you doing?' she asked angrily. Atlas gave a start.

'Huh? Oh, I wanted to see you about something, but you were asleep, and I didn't want to wake you up...' He trailed off, looking sheepish. Glaring, Midori walked to Elesa's room and checked inside. Seeing that Elesa was still asleep in her bed- unusual so late in the morning- she shut the door quietly and sat down on her sofa.

'That worked out well, didn't it?' she said sarcastically.

'Sorry,' Atlas said. 'But it is kinda important.'

'Go on,' Midori said with a sigh.

'It's about Zero,' Atlas said. Midori groaned loudly.

'Of course it is,' she said. 'You know, before you met Gigolo, you used to actually talk about interesting things once in a while.'

'Look, it's important, okay!' Atlas said loudly. Midori glared daggers at him.

'Elesa is asleep! For goodness sake, keep your voice down!' She said in a loud whisper.

'Wha- stop changing the subject! Listen. This squad is the laughing stock of the rest of the clan. Can you live with that?'

Midori rolled her eyes. 'And you think it's all Zero's fault.'

'He is the leader.' Atlas replied. 'Who else's fault would it be?'

'You don't get it, do you?' Midori said. 'It's everyone's fault.'

'Thanks for waking me up,' Elesa said, making Atlas jump. 'I'm heading out.' She paused to frown at Atlas, and then walked out the door.

'See?' Midori said. 'You woke her up.'

'Who cares?' Atlas said. Midori glared at him again. 'What do you mean, it's everyone's fault?'

'What does everyone in this squad have in common?' Midori asked. 'Oh wait, you wouldn't know, because other people don't interest you.' Atlas made to speak, but Midori interrupted him. 'Everyone in this squad screwed up in a big way.'

'What? I never-'

'Yes, you did. I know because Vivian told me.'

Atlas turned red. 'Please, never tell anyone about that.'

'I wasn't planning on it,' Midori assured him. Atlas sighed in relief. 'But it isn't just you- everyone else has as well. Maybe you should check out Zero's history- it's freely available, if you know where to look.'

'That's just it!' Atlas said suddenly. 'Why is someone who obviously screwed up big time, as evidenced by the way Meier talks to him, in charge of a squad?'

'I hardly think Gigolo would be a better leader,' Midori replied.

'Yeah, that's true,' Atlas agreed. 'I don't mean to replace Zero with him. We just need a new leader- someone who can turn our fortunes around. Don't you see?'

Midori sighed. 'I'll consider anything if it'll stop you wittering on about it.'

'Great. Just give it a minute- you'll see where I'm coming from.' Atlas stood. 'I'll see you at the bar this evening, right?'

Midori nodded. 'Yeah, sure.' Smiling, Atlas walked to the door. 'Oh, and Atlas?' He turned. 'Don't involve me in any of your- Gigolo's schemes again.' Atlas didn't know what to say as the door closed behind him.

Vivian put down the dumbbell and started stretching, having just finished an hours workout at the gym. She reactivated her vision overlays, which she had turned off for some peace and quiet while she exercised. Immediately a message came through from Meier.

NEED YOU AT OPS ROOM NOW, the message said as it flashed up in her vision. Vivian frowned. Meier rarely asked her for help any more. She stretched her arms hurriedly and rushed to the changing room to throw on some clothes. Whatever the case, it didn't do to keep Meier waiting.

5 minutes later she was walking into the ops room. The receptionist paused from her phone call to smile at her as she passed, waving towards the tactical room. Vivian smiled back and strode onwards.

'Didn't Atlas pass on my message?' Meier said as soon as she entered. A few other people, including President June, were stood around the holographic table in the center of the room.

'I haven't seen him since we got back,' Vivian replied. 'Oh- sorry. I had my implants turned off while I was exercising.'

'Keep them on at all times for the foreseeable future,' Meier said. 'We've got a situation and I'd like your opinion on it.' Vivian nodded and walked to Meier's side.

'It seems,' Meier began, 'That Zero may have been right. For once in his life.' He tapped the table and a map of the area around Aspertias base rose up. The locations of the nearby bases were highlighted; a few were flashing red.

'As you know, we lost contact with Torchbearers a while ago, as well as Benzene. We sent your squad to investigate both these situations,' Meier continued.

'About that-' June interjected. 'Why wasn't a bigger, or more competent-' Vivian's eyes narrowed '-squad sent?'

'You do realize that we are currently at war with the Scorpions, and cannot spare resources for what seem to be minor matters?' Meier said sarcastically. 'I suppose you were too busy with your hard schedule of nothing useful? Now quiet, or I'll have you sent away. This is a military matter, not a public one.' June colored, her fists clenching, but said nothing.

'As I was saying,' Meier said, 'We lost contact with both bases. Your team went to both, and both times you have reported seeing these black Spartans.'

'You wanted to ask about-' An aide tried to interject, but Meier waved him away.

'I remember! Anyway, we wanted to ask you for the footage you have of the battle, from D-4 and D-2's perspectives.'

'Midori and Gigolo?' Vivian said slowly. 'Yeah, I have it, but they

were killed.'

'That's what we want to see,' Meier said.

'Fine. I'm sending it now.' Vivian linked her personal files to the ops room address, and transmitted the videos. Meier glanced at the aide, who nodded. A glazed look appeared in his eyes. After a few seconds he grimaced.

'It's as we thought,' The aide said. 'They were both actually killed by D-4's rocket blast, not the Black Spartans.' Meier sighed.

'No luck there, then,' He said.

Vivian looked around the room. 'Anyone mind filling me in on what's going on?'

'I think I'd like another run through as well,' June said. Meier turned to glare at her, a look which she returned defiantly.

'I was going to anyway,' Meier said, still glaring at June. 'Unlike some here, you're actually useful to the clan.' Vivian sighed. Meier liked June a lot better than he did some of the previous presidents- Vivian cringed a memory- but they still came to blows. Which was surprising, given that Vivian knew that Meier had been rigging the elections since the civil war.

'We didn't believe after Torchbearer's went silent, but the Benzene went as well, and now, well, see for yourself.' Meier gestured at the map, at the 5 bases which were flashing red. 'All of these bases have dropped out of communications.'

'They form a circle,' June said. 'Around Torchbearer base.'

'Well done,' Meier said patronizingly. 'Anyone else want to make a redundant statement? No? Well, let's continue. We sent two recon teams to each of the bases, about 8 hours ago. They confirmed what you and Zero said about the black Spartans. They're fast, they all use energy swords, and they die quickly. And there are lots of them.'

Vivian nodded. It fit in with what she had observed in her two encounters with the black Spartans.

'There's more, and it's bad news. For everyone.' Meier looked around the table. 'June, Vivian, everyone- from now on this is classified. Nobody outside this group hears about this until I say so. Got it?'

Vivian nodded. After a moments hesitation, June did as well.

'Firstly, we sent the teams in 8 hours ago. They both were wiped out within an hour. They still haven't respawned.' Vivian heard a few gasps from around the table.

'The respawn times vary randomly, don't they?' June asked.

'Yes, but in our recorded history there has never been a respawn wait of more than 6 and a half hours. For a wait of 7 hours to happen to

24 Spartans at once is beyond the grounds of believability. We will have to wait longer to be sure, but it may be that they are dead. Permanently.' There was another murmur.

'Hence why you wanted to check how Midori and Gigolo died,' Vivian said.

'Yes. If they had been killed by the black Spartans, it would have suggested that the death wasn't permanent in at least some cases, but it seems they were just lucky.'

Vivian glanced at June. She had gone pale. She was a strong woman, Vivian knew- but this was shocking news. Vivian was surprised by how well she was taking it.

Every spartan, whatever their clan, had a 400 year lifespan, at least, to look forward to from the day they were born, appearing at the core in their birth base. To have that cut short was horrifying. Vivian could understand how June was feeling. If the news was released to the rest of the clan- the chaos would be as bad at least as the civil war 20 years ago. Vivian still had over 300 years of her life left- she didn't want to die before all of those years were used up.

'There were these black Spartans- actually, let's call them blackheads, it rolls easier- all over Benzene base,' Meier said. He seemed unfazed by the news, but then he had seen a lot in his life. 'But the squad at Torchbearer base reported far fewer. Also, the core was gone. Just vanished, like it had never been there.'

'We destroyed that core,' Vivian said, an idea forming in her head.

'You did, which suggests that the blackheads spawn from the core. And before you ask, because I can see the question on your lips,' Vivian frowned- she wasn't that easy to read, surely- 'the core at Benzene was covered in black, like tar, and seemed deformed. Just like at Torchbearer base.'

'So, are we to assume that the Benzene and Torchbearers are gone?' June asked. 'Just like that? All dead, along with those other three clans?'

'Yes,' Meier said simply. He tapped the table, and a red circle appeared around the bases. 'This is where the blackheads are now, at best. If we extrapolate from the times the bases dropped out of contact, the blackheads will reach us,' he paused, and the red circle expanded until it touched the symbol marking Aspertias, 'in about 2 days.'

Vivian noticed that there was no murmur or gasp this time. No matter that they were facing something that they had never seen before, something with the capability to kill permanently and wipe clans off the face of the planet, they were all warriors, and they knew how to fight. Now that they knew the details of their enemy, they could fight it. She felt a strange pride for her clan. But there was something she had to say.

'I don't know if you realized this- if you did, the simulation didn't show it well- but this expansion is going to be exponential. The more

bases that fall, the faster they will multiply.' Vivian looked at Meier.

Meier nodded slowly. 'Continue,' he said.

Vivian pressed on. 'If we do nothing- even if we just defend- we will seal our own doom. Right now they only have four cores to spawn from. That number is going to increase unless we do something about it. We know that they can be fought, and we know how to beat them- destroy the core.'

Meier smiled. 'Go on. I've come up with my own plan, but I want to hear yours.' Everyone was looking at her, Vivian realized. Even June- someone she hardly knew- was staring at her.

'We need to stop them from gaining any more cores, and remove the cores they already have. Firstly, I recommend that we send messages to all the clans- not just our allies, all of them- nearby, warning them of the threat. We may not miss the scorpions, but if their base falls we'll have a worse enemy to fight. If any bases do fall, we need to get as many of their troops to safety, assuming they'll fight for us. Manpower is going to be a valuable resource in this war.'

'Second, we need to form strike teams to infiltrate the bases and neutralize the cores. My squad managed to do it, so I'm sure the more competent teams will have no trouble with it.' The last was said with a sharp look at June.

'I saw the response we had to the news that death from these Spartans is permanent. Telling the public this will cause panic, and people will refuse to fight. We need to hide this from the rest of the clan for as long as we can.'

'We can't lie to the rest of the clan forever,' June said. She seemed angry about the idea.

'No, but no need to tell them something that will only increase the chance of their deaths,' Meier said. He nodded to Vivian. 'Good analysis. My intention was to release a statement informing the clan about the threat, and the danger it poses to the clan, but leave out the part about permanent death.'

'I suppose that's where I come in?' June asked, sighing. 'I'll do it, but for the record, I'm not happy about this.'

'Nobody cares,' Meier said. 'Well, if we're all in agreement, then we should conclude this meeting. There are still several things we need to discuss, but that can be left for the meantime.' June turned and walked away without a word. 'You stay,' Meier told Vivian. He waited until the aides had walked out, and then turned to her.

'I want you back as my adviser,' he said. 'The years haven't dulled your skill- you're as good a tactician as you ever were. I need you, Vivian.'

'Will Zero get his place back as well?' Vivian asked.

'No. I won't have someone who opposed me openly at my side.'

'I can't leave him,' Vivian said. Meier sighed, and she continued. 'He needs me.'

'Very well. I know better than to force you.' Meier sighed once more. 'If you change your mind, I'll be waiting.' Vivian nodded. 'Goodbye, Vivian. It was nice to see you- for real.'

'You too, Meier. You too.' Vivian smiled, and walked out.

11

The files appeared in Zero's Inbox as he lay in bed, in an email entitled 'Miss airs her dirty laundry.' Zero immediately sat up when he saw the title. He hadn't chosen it, but knew that it was a code for transmissions from his old civil war comrades. He didn't know who it came from- there was no sender address- but it must be important for one of the few one time codes they'd made when it was clear they were losing to be used.

Zero opened the file cautiously. It was an audio file, several minutes long. He set it to play. The soundtrack began to play, and he heard several voices. He recognized Meier's, and Vivian's as well as the voice of June, surprisingly. Her getting in to power was one of the 'resistance's' great accomplishments in the past few years. Meier had no idea that she was really a staunch universalist supporter.

When the audio file finished, Zero's heart was beating fast. He knew a number of people who would want to act on the information, use it to drive Meier and his militarists out of power. Zero had no intention of helping them- he had long since stopped supporting the Universalists- but he was already making plans. If what he had heard was true, then he and his squad were in great danger. Zero began mentally making a list of people who owed him favors. He was going to have to call all of them in if he wanted to get out alive.

12

Elesa was deep in thought as she entered the apartment she shared with Midori, which was why she didn't immediately notice Midori sitting on the sofa, reading.

'Sup?' Midori asked as Elesa walked past, oblivious. Elesa gave a start and looked around, quickly spotting Midori. She sighed quietly.

'Sorry. Just a little on edge,' she explained.

'That's fine doll,' Midori said. 'Wanna talk about it?'

Elesa hesitated. Midori was her best friend. She should be able to tell her important things. That was what friends did, wasn't it?

'It's... about Gigolo,' She began. Midori rolled her eyes.

'What isn't these days? You know, I had Atlas in here not 2 hours ago giving me some spiel about how Gigolo would be such a better leader than Zero. To be honest, it's both of them that's the problem. I say if we can't decide between them, just kick 'em both out and be done

with it.'

'That wasn't quite what I was going to say,' Elesa said carefully. Atlas was trying to bring Midori over to his side? That was worrying. In any case, it wouldn't do to say something to Midori about it now; she would only get frustrated.

'The other day, in training... Gigolo tried to kiss me.'

'Something so simple?' Midori said. 'Just slap him and be done with it.'

'I did,' Elesa said, which Midori smiled at. 'It's just... now he's avoiding me.'

'How would you notice? It's not like you ever spend time with him anyway.'

'No, I mean- I saw him in the south hall, coming back from the gym, and as soon as he saw me he gave a little jump and quickly walked down a side passage.'

'Ah. Sounds like he's realized there are probably going to be repercussions. Have you told anyone else?' Elesa shook her head. 'Good.' Midori leaned over and patted Elesa's arm. 'My advice is let him stew. Eventually he should break down and come to apologize. If not, I'll give him a stern talking to.'

'Thanks,' Elesa said. 'I...' she trailed off. Midori smiled invitingly, but Elesa didn't say any more. Midori gave a mental shrug and lay back on the sofa. Elesa was still standing thinking when the TV switched itself on. The clan logo showed, and then the image showed president June standing at a podium. An official announcement.

'I have some important, and disturbing, news to share with you, my fellow clan members,' she began. Elesa turned to stare at the screen. Midori sat forward. Official announcements were fairly rare, and always important.

'As some of you know, recently we lost contact with several allied clans. We now know that this was not due to faulty equipment, or an enemy clan, but to a new type of enemy, hostile to all life on the planet. They have shown their only desire to be the destruction of clans and the death of all of us.'

Elesa watched with some frustration. Why couldn't politicians ever just give you the facts, rather than hiding everything behind layers of hyperbole and build up?

'These enemies take the form of black clad Spartans wielding energy swords. They are very fast and agile, but weak- they die from a few bullets.'

'Like the ones we faced,' Midori said. Elesa nodded, not taking her eyes off the screen.

'Their strategy seems to be to attack and overwhelm bases, much like we do. However, when they get to the core they corrupt it, turning it into a machine which they use for their own reproduction. This, it

seems, causes the destruction of the clan, meaning that anyone in said clan who dies... later dies permanently. They can be stopped, however, by destroying the cores of bases they control and preventing any more from being captured. We are working together with our allies to set up defenses to ensure that no more clans fall to this enemy.' June paused. 'This is a crisis with the potential to destroy our civilization, a crisis none of us could have foreseen. It is an outside context problem in that respect, and we need to work together to prevent it from spiraling out of control. I hope I can rely on all of you.' June made a bow, and then the image disappeared. The TV turned off.

Elesa glared at the screen. Another problem, on top of all the others she had to face. With an angry mutter she walked into her room and closed the door.

Midori leaned back thoughtfully. A new enemy with the power to destroy clans. The implications were worrying, to say the least.

13

Gigolo was already waiting in Harvey's when Atlas walked in, engrossed in thought. He saw his friend waving out of the corner of his eye and wandered over, pulling up a stool next to Gigolo.

'You're late,' Gigolo said.

'And a good day to you too,' Atlas replied. 'What was it you wanted to talk about?'

'You first,' Gigolo said. Atlas shrugged.

'Fine. It's good news, I guess. I talked to Midori about our little problem.'

'And she agreed?' Gigolo asked eagerly.

'Not quite. I think I actually pissed her off slightly. But she did agree to think about it.'

'And that's good news?' Gigolo asked.

'Be patient, there's more. Sheesh.' Atlas waved over a bar attendant and ordered a drink. He liked Gigolo, but sometimes his friend was so irritating.

'Well go on,' Gigolo said.

'Midori said something about everyone in the squad having made some kind of huge mess up, which is supposedly why we're here.'

'How is that helpful?' Gigolo asked.

'Because if we can find out what Zero did, then we may be able to use it to our advantage.'

Gigolo looked thoughtful. 'I don't suppose Midori told you what it was?'

'No. But she did say that it was somewhere in the public domain, so we could find out for ourselves. But she didn't give me any clue of where to start.'

Gigolo sipped his drink thoughtfully. Atlas took his drink from the attendant and did the same.

'If we can find out what everyone did, then we'd be able to blackmail them.' Atlas stared at Gigolo, shocked.

'What? Why would we need to do that?'

'Lets face it- Vivian and Elesa aren't going to help us of their own free will. We need something to give them an incentive.'

'I don't know, man. Blackmailing is pretty low.'

'Well, we may or may not need to resort to that,' Gigolo said. Atlas made a noncommittal noise. 'Oh yeah- about why I asked you here. The other reason, I mean. It's to do with Elesa.'

'Oh yeah?' Atlas gave his friend a glance.

'Yeah. You see, I kinda fucked up.' Gigolo was kneading his palms.

'How so?'

'I- well, I've sorta always liked her, and when I saw her after training one day, I just couldn't help it...'

Atlas stared at his friend again. 'You did what!?'

'I kissed her!' Gigolo hung his head. Atlas stared for a few moments, and then burst out laughing.

'Oh geez, you really had me going there for a minute,' Atlas said while laughing. Gigolo looked at him, an expression of some horror on his face.

'Why are you laughing?' he asked, all serious.

'Dude, I thought you were going to say you forced yourself upon her or something.'

'Well... I kinda did...' Gigolo trailed off, unsure of himself.

'It was just a kiss, man. No biggie. If you're really worried, go apologize or something. Hell, I could talk to her for you, or get Midori to.' Gigolo shook his head.

'Not Midori. I know she'd take it badly. She's so protective of Elesa.' He sighed. 'I'll apologize when I get the chance. It's just...'

Atlas slapped Gigolo on the back. 'Hey, if we didn't have all this shit to worry about, I'm sure you'd get along just fine with her. After all this has blown over, then we'll see about setting you up with her.'

Gigolo smiled gratefully at Atlas. 'Thanks.'

They sat in silence for a short while, and then were surprised when the TV in the corner of the bar turned on to show president June standing behind a podium, looking serious. She began speaking, and within a few seconds the whole room was silent, an unusual occasion in the most popular bar in the clan.

After June had stopped speaking and gone off air, it took only a few moments for the general hubbub to reach its previous level. Gigolo smiled.

'So Zero was right about those black assholes,' He said. 'Who'd have thought it?'

'I don't know quite why it required an official announcement,' Atlas said. 'I mean, it's serious and all- if they have the ability to wipe out clans- but really it's not much different to any of the other clans we've been at war with over the years.'

'They gave an official announcement when we declared war on Scorpions, didn't they?' Gigolo asked. 'But I see what you mean. Those guys are piss easy, just open up with an Assault rifle and spray. They go down like you that one time you drank a bottle of Vodka.'

Atlas frowned at Gigolo. 'Firstly, it was more than a bottle. Secondly, if they're so easy, why did you get killed by them at Benzene base?'

'We were jumped, plus we were totally exposed. Oh, and Midori's shooting sucked. I swear she killed us both when she fired that second rocket.'

'Hey! That's my Girlfriend you're trash talking!' Gigolo laughed, and after a few moments Atlas joined in. Within a few minutes they'd forgotten the announcement completely.

6. Fools and the Fools who follow them (3)

14

Zero wandered through the corridors of the base, thinking about what he was going to say. All too soon he was outside the door of the place he really didn't want to go. Sighing, he checked his watch and saw that it was time. Too bad he couldn't put it off, but knowing Haru if he tried to delay she'd only be more angry when he said what he really needed to say.

With a little trepidation, he knocked on the door. After a moment it was opened by a red headed girl, wearing a white dress that showed off her body. The image it gave was contrasted by the cold look in her eyes, an appraising look that made you want to put on an extra layer of clothes.

'Hello Haru,' Zero said, trying to summon up enthusiasm. It failed.

'Hello Zero,' Haru replied in a cold tone. Zero almost flinched before remembering that it was her normal voice. 'Long time.' She flicked her head backwards. 'Come in.'

Zero followed slowly, shutting the door behind him. Haru's room was modest, smaller than his own apartment, with only a bed, a sitting chair, a desk with a computer and a small washroom. Haru picked a book off the sitting chair and sat down, indicating for Zero to pull over a chair from the desk.

'Marco told me you wouldn't come,' Haru said when he'd sat down. 'He thinks that you've abandoned us.' Zero bit back what he'd been going to say. He really hated Haru. Even then they'd been fighting together, 20 years ago, he'd disliked her. She and Marco had been horrible people to work with- manipulative, uncaring, mean. It didn't help that she'd strung him along once, before heartlessly throwing him away. That thought made him angry for a moment- and she talked about him abandoning her!- but to Haru the job came first, always.

'You saw the message, I assume?' Haru said, and Zero realized he'd been holding his breath.

'Yes, but I'm not sure I was meant to.' He decided to try and edge towards what he wanted to say, ease her into it gently.

'Why? You're still technically one of our captains, even though you've been inactive for 20 years.'

'Well, you see, I'd thought I'd been taken off that list. Getting the message was the first I knew of it. Then you contacted me.'

'Why would you have been taken off the list?' Either Haru didn't realize what he was alluding to or she was trying to do something else. Either was as likely. She shook her head. 'We need to act on this information. I don't think anyone knows we have it, yet, but the longer we wait the more likely we'll be found or it will come out from another source.'

'What were you planning?' Zero asked.

'We want June to make a public announcement. Say she was forced to keep quiet by Meier and his militarist supporters, but she believes that the rest of the clan deserves to know. The people will rise up with us, and overthrow Meier, creating a new, better government.' Haru was shouting now. 'It will be what we have been fighting for, all these years.'

Zero stared at her. Was she crazy?

'Haru, you're crazy if you think that will work. Now is the worst possible time to try and overthrow Meier! Come on, you saw what was in that message. If we weaken the clan with yet another civil war, we'll all be killed permanently.'

Haru shook her head. 'Not if we act quickly enough. I am confident Meier can be disposed of within a day.' Zero tried to speak, but she interrupted. 'This is the best chance we've had in years, the best chance we'll ever have! We can't let it go by! So what if it's risky? We have to take risks to make a better life for ourselves, that's

what we've always done!'

Zero looked at her, and then averted his eyes from her piercing gaze. He slowly shook his head.

'I'd rather live in the society we have now than waste it trying to 'improve' it,' he said. Haru sighed loudly.

'What happened to you? You used to be some passionate, so devoted to the cause. Where did that man go?'

Zero suddenly felt angry. He wasn't going to be manipulated by her, or anyone else anymore. He'd promised himself that.

'That man wasn't me. He was a fool. He mostly disappeared when Meier crushed my squad and threw me in jail. A bit more of him left when I had to watch Vivian get hurt because of my actions. What was left of him after that went when I finally got out and saw how nothing had changed. All you're ever going to achieve is hurting people. You won't make life better for the ordinary clan members. You won't help anyone.'

Haru nodded, seemingly to herself. 'Yes, that's what Marco said you'd say. I foolishly held out hope that you wouldn't have been changed by 20 years of being Meier's little bitch.' She tapped her cheek. 'You realize that we can't let you go now that you know.'

'I don't see how you're going to stop me,' Zero said. Haru gazed at him. 'I won't do anything to help or hinder you. In return, I want your promise that you'll leave me alone.' Haru said nothing.

'Well?'

'If you say anything, you'll go down as well,' Haru said.

'The same applies to you,' Zero replied. Haru smiled.

'So it does.' She didn't seem convinced.

'I'm leaving,' Zero said. He stood up and walked to the door. 'Please don't contact me again,' he said as he walked away. Haru watched him leave, a calculating expression on her face.

15

'Ah, Vivian,' Meier exclaimed jovially as Vivian walked into the meeting room. He was sat at the same table as before, this time flanked by two men who Vivian didn't recognize. 'Now that you're here, we can start. We're discussing tactics today.'

'Who is this?' Asked the man on the right, a gray haired man who must have been at least 350. He had a harsh face, currently glaring at Vivian.

'This is that tactician I was telling you about, Vernon. Her name is Vivian.' Vernon looked suspiciously at her for a moment, and then shrugged.

'Well, if she's as good as you say, I suppose it doesn't matter what she looks like,' he said.

'This old geezer is Vernon,' Meier said. 'He's the leader of the Steel Templars.'

'Pleased to meet you,' Vivian said cautiously.

'And this,' Meier said, indicating the other man, 'is Tomalon. A big hit with the ladies, and still a half decent general. He's the chief of the Vermillion's army.'

Tomalon smiled at her. He was young, younger than Meier by a couple of decades, with thick brown hair and a kindly face. 'I've been hoping I could meet you since Meier told us about you,' he said, offering a hand. Vivian shook it.

'A pleasure to meet you to,' she said. Vernon frowned, and made a comment to Meier about young people. Vivian didn't quite catch it, but Meier smiled, and then suddenly looked serious.

'Now, you all know the details.' Meier tapped the table, and the same map came up. The red circle was slightly larger this time.

'Blackheads spreading, permanent death, end of civilization, yada yada. What we're here for is to make plans about how to avert this. As is obvious, we need to get rid of the cores that the OCP currently holds.'

'I'm sorry- what's the OCP?' Vivian asked.

'Huh? Oh, its the name we've given to this crisis. It stands for Outside Context Problem.'

'It simply means that it's a problem that we've never faced before and couldn't have prepared for because we simply had no idea it could exist,' Tomalon said.

'Yes, quite,' Vernon snapped. 'Now, can we get on?' Meier nodded.

'Right. So, as we all agree, we need to destroy these cores. I recommend small strike teams dropping in and making their way straight there, and then getting evacuated as soon as possible.'

'That doesn't fix the problem of the blackheads which already exist,' Vivian pointed out.

'If they capture another core then we'd be back to square one,' Tomalon said.

'This is true, and brings me- slightly quickly, but no matter- onto the next problem- defense.' Meier frowned. 'Obviously, we need to eliminate all of the blackheads if we're going to properly solve the problem, but hunting them down will be costly. Their speed and agility gives them an advantage indoors and in tight places, so clearing bases conventionally isn't a good option.'

'We should simply bomb the bases,' Vernon said. 'Much less of a hassle.'

'We could do that, but that doesn't guarantee that all of the blackheads will die, and then we've got to clear out an even worse

mess,' Tomalon said.

'If we could somehow lure them into the open, we could kill them easily,' Vivian said. 'They can't attack at range, so they'd be sitting ducks for aircraft.'

'Good thinking, but we'll need something to lure them with first,' Meier said.

'We know they're attracted to people,' Vernon said. Vivian glanced at him in alarm. How could he suggest such a thing?

'And cores,' Tomalon said. 'Which is a slightly less horrible alternative.'

'I'll pass on our ideas to a think group,' Meier said. 'This meeting is macro scale thinking.' He pulled out a tablet and checked something on it. 'How do we defend our bases from their attacks?'

'They're fast, but weak. Some kind of killing gallery would work.' Vernon looked around. 'Any suggestions?'

'We could have a long corridor leading from a single ground level, with gantries above that people can fire from,' Tomalon suggested. 'Can they climb?'

'Not as far as we've seen,' Meier said.

'They have energy swords,' Vivian said. 'Couldn't they just burn their way through any maze we set out for them?'

'Again, I'm not sure. This is beyond the scope of this meeting, but as far as we've seen the individual blackheads aren't very clever. They just seem to follow each other around normally, and move towards the nearest base or human. I think climbing and cutting- and throwing their energy swords, that was the other suggestion someone came up with- is beyond them.'

'So a maze idea is good?' Tomalon asked. 'We'll need to start building soon. Vermillion is nearly as close to the OCP as Aspertias is.'

'We can discuss it further in later meetings,' Meier said. 'Next, individual engagement tactics.'

'We need to make survival a top priority,' Vivian said. 'Come up with plans which ensure the survival of as many soldiers as possible, so we have more to fight next time.' Meier and Vernon both looked unhappy with the idea. Vivian guessed that neither of them had placed much importance on it before. However, neither of them complained.

'Some of your soldiers were able to escape death when they fought by killing themselves, weren't they?' Tomalon asked. Meier nodded. 'Then tell them to do that.'

'That's not possible,' Meier said. 'People will start to wonder why, and they might realize that we're holding something back. We need to avoid the public finding out that the blackheads are capable of

killing people permanently.'

'Why?' Vernon asked. 'They're going to find out at some point anyway.'

'It's different for your clan- and yours too, Tomalon. They're both reasonably politically stable. We're still recovering from a civil war we had 20 years ago, and recently we've been seeing some worrying activity from what is left of the losing side. That information would throw us over the edge- we simply can't risk it.'

'You wouldn't see that in my clan,' Vernon grumbled.

'So, no suicide,' Vivian said. 'Are you sure? If a lot of people start dying, it'll become much harder to cover up, like you did with the recon teams.' Tomalon nodded.

'It's a no-win situation,' He said. 'Seeing as it's going to come out anyway, I'd say tell them, but it's your choice.'

'We'll think about it,' Meier said. 'Next-' he was interrupted suddenly by an alarm. There was a hurried knock on the door and then a secretary burst in.

'Sorry general!' he said as soon as he saw Meier's glare, 'But this is important! Cortex base is under attack by the blackheads, and they say they can't hold them.'

Meier nodded. 'I see. Now, get out!' With a hurried bow, the secretary ran from the room.

'That's troubling,' Vernon said. 'It will make it harder on us if we just let them die.'

'We should send a group of evacuation pelicans,' Vivian said. 'And a squad to destroy the core while they're at it.'

'They won't want to join you,' Tomalon mused. 'They're allied to the Scorpions.'

'They'll see they have no choice when their base falls,' Meier replied. 'We'll do what Vivian says.'

'I volunteer my squad for the evacuation duty,' Vivian said. Meier looked surprised.

'Why?' he asked.

'Zero is still a good leader. Give him a chance to do something- we've been sitting around for the past couple of days, while everyone else has been out on missions.'

Meier considered the proposal. Finally he nodded. 'Alright. But you stay here, you're too valuable to risk.' Vivian thought about arguing for a moment, but then decided against it. She nodded. 'If that's settled,' Meier said, 'let us continue.'

'I mean, remember Monad pass, 2 years ago? They massacred one of our units in a surprise attack. No honor in it at all.'

'Shut up, Gigolo,' Elesa said. 'Besides, what would you know about honor?'

'Hey, I-'

'She said shut up,' Zero said. 'So shut up.'

'Just piss off Zero,' Gigolo replied. 'I don't care about what you have to say anymore.' Zero sighed.

'That's not a good attitude to take to Meier when you try and get him to demote me,' he said. 'Meier looks for intelligence and likeability in his officers, two qualities you seem to lack.' Zero saw Gigolo share a panicked look with Atlas through the open cabin door. 'I do have friends in the Ops room, you know.'

Normally Zero would have been worried by the knowledge that two members of his squad were trying to get him removed from the clan, but it didn't matter so much anymore. There were more important things happening, and in any case there wasn't really enough time left for what they were trying to do to happen. He planned to be in Nasces within a week, if not on the central continent.

Gigolo was looking embarrassed, but quickly turned to anger. 'Don't think that just because you know we'll stop trying,' he warned. Zero nodded absently.

'I think you could stand to improve your punctuality as well,' Midori said. 'While we're still on the topic of ways Gigolo could improve.'

'Were we ever on that topic?' Atlas asked, smiling.

'Well, it's annoying me,' Midori replied. Gigolo glared at both of them.

'If you must know, I was asleep,' he said hotly. 'Being killed by our leaders awful plans has messed up my sleep cycle.'

'Give it a rest!' Elesa said. 'Are you even capable of talking about anything else?' Gigolo turned a bit redder. Zero watched with interest; he'd noticed Gigolo acting funny around Elesa recently- not that he saw them together much anyway- while Elesa seemed to be getting harsher on Gigolo. Well, if it made her speak up a bit more, it was fine by him.

The conversation moved on, mainly between Midori, Gigolo and Atlas. Like him, Elesa kept quiet; she looked like she was thinking about something. Zero didn't feel like talking. Right now, the only person he wanted to see was Vivian, but she'd been busy for the past day or so. Plus, if she got wind that he knew the things the ops room was trying to keep secret, she'd probably tell Meier, and he didn't trust himself to be able to keep that secret if the conversation turned that way.

Zero sighed. Sometimes it seemed that everyone he met was at best trying to make his life hell, and at worst trying to actively kill

him.

His thoughts were interrupted by a loud beeping from the cockpit.

'Oh, shit,' Atlas swore. 'The fuel line to the right thruster just went.'

'Is that bad?' asked Midori.

'Not unless it catches fire,' Atlas said. There was a small bang.
'Crap.'

'What's the situation?' Zero asked, getting to his feet.

'I've lost the right thruster. It should be okay... wait, no it won't. I'm losing altitude.' Zero looked around. They didn't seem to be in any kind of death spin, which was probably a good sign.

'Can you fix it?' He asked.

'Not up here. I'm going for a soft landing. Once we're down I'll be able to fix it in half an hour probably, but we'll have to head back to base.'

Suddenly Zero realized something. Cortex was on the other side of the area currently occupied by the blackheads- so they were currently inside that area themselves.

Apparently Elesa had been having the same thoughts, because she said the same.

'Huh? Well, if they come I guess we'll just kill a few and then respawn back at base,' Midori said. Elesa nodded.

'It'll be a pain to lose the bird though,' Atlas said. 'I've spent a good length of time fitting it out.'

Oh, shit, shit... Zero screwed his eyes shut. They didn't know. It was almost comical to hear them shrug off the idea of being killed by the blackheads so easily. But could he tell them? If he did, then certainly Gigolo at least wouldn't be able to keep his mouth shut, assuming they survived.

Another piece of information came to his mind. Part of the reason Gigolo was so nonchalant about the fighting the blackheads was that he had already fought them, and come back- or so he thought. But Zero knew that he'd just been crazily lucky, and died to Midori's rocket blast, not the blackheads themselves. So could he use that to his advantage? If they were cornered, perhaps he could use Midori's rocket launcher and kill the rest of the squad himself. If they were; he was still hoping that they'd be able to fix the pelican in time.

With a thud the pelican came to rest on the earth. It wasn't a hard landing; certainly not by the likes Zero had felt in his life.

'Alright then,' Atlas said. The back door came down, and Zero saw that they had landed on the side of a barren hill. A small track ran

past where they had landed, up to a cave a few hundred meters beyond them.

Atlas came out of the cockpit and began slowly gathering up some tools from the lockers. To Zero's eyes, he seemed to be moving at glacial speed. Worry and frustration bubbled within him; he couldn't hold it in. 'Hurry up!' he snapped.

'Hold on,' Atlas said with a hurt look. 'I'm moving as fast as I can.'

'No you're not,' _Zero almost said, but held it in. Instead he started pacing back and forth up the row of seats. His worry wasn't so much that he'd tip one of the squad off- they had no clue- but that someone watching the footage would guess from his actions that he knew something. It was unlikely, but Zero couldn't afford any risks.

Eventually Atlas got his tools together and walked outside to begin work on the engine. Zero snapped at Elesa and Midori to set up a watch, which they did with questioning looks at him. Of course they would; he wasn't normally this harsh. If only they knew why, then they'd be obeying without question. Eventually his internal rant was interrupted by Elesa.

'I see something,' she said.

'What!' Zero shouted. 'Uh, what is it,' He said again in a more normal tone.

'It looks like a group of Spartans... yeah, they're blackheads. They're moving too fast for normal people. Doesn't look like they're coming this way.'

Shit! Zero wanted to scream. Instead he forced himself to walk to Atlas.

'How long?' he asked with forced calm.

'It's worse than I thought,' Atlas replied. 'The fuel links totally bust. Which is odd,' he said as he stood up, 'because I checked it a week ago.'

Something in Zero's mind connected there. Could it be sabotage?
Haru! He shook his head angrily, and then stopped when he realized what he was doing. Well, that was something to worry about if-
_When!- _they got back to base.

'Can you fix it here?' He asked.

'Probably not,' Atlas replied. 'I'd need some components we don't have here.'

'So you really mean no?' Zero snapped.

'Uh, yeah,' Atlas replied. He seemed confused by Zero's attitude. 'Our best bet is to set off a distress signal. There are supposed to be other squads out on the rescue mission, aren't there?'

'Yes, but thanks to Gigolo here, we're an hour behind them!' Zero

tried to hold in his frustration. 'Okay, set the distress beacon, and link the pelican computer to our suit computers.' He turned to Elesa. 'What can you see?'

'They're coming this way. They'll be here in 5 minutes.'

'How many?'

'About 300.'

Zero felt a sinking feeling. There was no way they could hold off that many. He could just take Midori's rocket launcher and try to kill them all himself, but that would look very strange, and besides one of them would probably try and fight back before he could kill them all.

'Okay, we're abandoning the pelican. Up the hill and into that cave entrance.'

The squad muttered among themselves, but surprisingly went along with it, even Gigolo. They jogged up the hill in silence and entered the cave, which turned out to be some kind of old coal mine.

'Did they look like they'd seen us?' Midori asked suddenly. Elesa shook her head.

'They were coming this way originally.'

'Then we could hide in here,' she suggested. 'Then wait for them to leave or our distress call to be picked up.'

'Good idea,' Zero said. 'We'll move deeper in.' The squad continued into the mine, with Gigolo in the lead and Elesa at the rear. It occurred to Zero suddenly that there might be blackheads in the mine- who knew where they hid?- but none came jumping out to end his life.

Eventually they reached a dead end, in a tunnel with huge seams of coal running along the walls.

'Here's as good a spot as any,' Zero said. It wasn't a good spot by any normal reckoning, but he'd seen something which made it perfect for his needs.

'There was a better one just back,' Gigolo said. 'We should-' Atlas shushed him.

Huh, Zero thought. Maybe the squad was picking up on his worry. It would explain how uncharacteristically subdued they all were.

'Uh... Gigolo, you and Atlas go in front with your assault rifles. Midori, in middle. Elesa, you and me at the back- pick them off with your DMR.' The squad acquiesced with only a slight grumble from Gigolo about favoritism. They stood in formation for the next few minutes, until the sight Zero had been dreading appeared.

A white gleam appeared at the far end of the tunnel. After a few seconds it resolved itself into a blackheads, it's sword casting the light. In a flash Elesa aimed her rifle and fired, killing the blackhead in a single shot. Nobody said a word; even Gigolo was

silent.

Then there was a faint hissing sound, and then running feet could be heard. A bigger white glow appeared, and suddenly a sea of blackheads was charging towards the squad.

Zero didn't need to say anything; the sight was enough to set all of the squad off. Gunfire sounded and bullets flew towards the onrushing mass, slaying black Spartans where they ran. As many as the killed, though, more replaced them. Zero's heart was beating. With his spare hand, he pulled a grenade from his pocket. Just a few seconds... he pulled the pin out and slammed it into the coal vein.

Normally, coal burned slowly- far too slowly for what Zero wanted. But he'd seen a sign as they ran in. It read 'Coal Dust- danger of explosion!' And explode it did. Zero didn't know why there was so much around, or why it exploded so violently, but all of a sudden the air was in flames. The fireball killed him instantly, and the rest of his squad a split second later. The fireball continued down the tunnel, burning the blackheads as well, and setting fire to the coal veins, which added their heat to the conflagration. The fireball spewed out of the mine opening, attracting the attention of a few pelican pilots who had seen the distress signal too late to help.

Zero just hoped it was worth it.

7. The Breakdown of Relations (1)

The Breakdown of Relations

As always, it seemed as though no time had passed between the instant that Zero died in the explosion and the moment he was reconstructed from the respawner. His first feeling was one of intense relief, as he hadn't been entirely certain he would ever respawn. His second feeling was of sudden worry. It would be futile if, having escaped death at the hands of the blackheads, he was then thrown in jail for what he knew. He was therefore at once happy and worried to see Vivian standing in the foyer immediately outside the respawning rooms, a look of relief on her face.

Vivian quickly made her expression more neutral and walked slowly over to where Zero was stood.

'Pleased to see me?' Zero asked. It seemed like a reasonably neutral statement to make, and right now he didn't want to do anything suspicious.

'Aren't I always?' She asked in return, before smiling and pulling him into a hug. Zero returned the hug, careful not to crush her in his armor.

'How long was I out?' he asked, taking his arms away.

'Just a touch over 6 hours,' Vivian replied. 'The rest of the squad has already respawned.' Zero nodded. If he was the last to respawn, it would make sense for her to be worried for him. In some way, it was nice that she did worry about him; he'd had precious little to do with her over the past few days. In fact, they'd barely spoken since

he'd messed up at her apartment. Zero still wasn't sure what had come over him then, but he'd felt it recently as well- a sudden feeling that nothing mattered, and that he should just go and do whatever came to mind. And then, when he returned to what he hoped was normal, he always felt like shit.

'Anyhow, things have been moving fast while you've been gone,' Vivian said, snapping Zero back into the real world.

'Good news first,' Zero said. Vivian gave him a worried smile.

'I'm afraid there isn't much news we could call good, as such,' she said. 'Half an hour or so after you died, we got a distress signal from another base. Yet another came an hour or so after that, and we've had two more since, the last one about 20 minutes ago.' Zero was taken aback. How could they move so fast? It must have shown on his face, for Vivian went on.

'We missed one thing- we don't know how fast they spawn from their cores. I mean, it must be more fast than we do- much, much faster- but we haven't got any sort of estimate, because nobody knows how many there are around. We never even made an original estimate, but current guesses range from one a minute to 1 a second.'

Zero was taken aback once again. At a large clan like Aspertias, with 5000 or so members, roughly 15 Spartans were born every year at the core. The rate of spawn at cores controlled by the blackheads must be a factor of thousands, no, tens of thousands higher. But there was something else, too.

'Do they respawn?' he asked. Vivian shrugged.

'How would we tell? They all look the same.' She sighed. 'Back on track, we couldn't spare any resources to help the clans that came under attack. All but one of them has fallen; the last should do so within an hour. Meier is understandably reluctant to commit forces to protect clans we aren't strongly allied with.' She paused for a moment.

'What about our attempts to help Cortex?' asked Zero.

'That was a success, I suppose. Almost all of the squads we sent made it back; between them they rescued 400 soldiers, most of whom have joined us. Not that they had much choice; when they core fell they lost their clan allegiance.'

'What, totally? They weren't tied to any clan?'

'Yes, which we assume means that if they died... they died permanently. What with having no core to respawn at, and all.' Zero realized that she was looking at him closely, and he twisted his face into what he hoped was a shocked expression.

'On top of that, the attempt to destroy their core failed. The squads sent to destroy the four cores already held by the blackheads were a little more successful; two of them were destroyed.'

'So now the enemy holds 6 cores, which means there will be more of them, so they'll take even more cores?'

Vivian nodded reluctantly. 'It's an exponential growth pattern- the longer we wait, the faster they expand. Sooner or later there will come a point at which we simply won't be able to defeat them. What's worrying is, that point may have already passed.'

Zero had a sinking feeling. He had realized this already, sort of, but to have it confirmed by someone he knew was currently in the upper echelons of the military... surely south of the channel would be safe? The blackheads can't swim, can they?_

'Finally,' Vivian continued, 'Vermillion have come under attack.' Seeing his blank face, she added 'They were one of the clans we were sharing resources with to counter this threat.'

'They're a big clan, aren't they? How are they holding up?'

'We had some ideas on making our bases more defensible, which we shared with them. Unfortunately, the defenses were only part finished when they were attacked, but they seem like they're helping. They've also been able to confirm some details about how the blackheads attack for us.' She waited for Zero to say something, but he kept quiet.

'A lot to take in, huh?' she said finally.

'Yeah,' Zero said absently. 'Say, do we still get 12 hours break after respawning?'

'Yes, Meier didn't think it worth it to remove it.' Zero, who had been watching closely, saw her flinch as she realized what she'd said. Did that count as a way he could have worked it out? Probably not; she knew him well, and he doubted he'd have picked up on it if he hadn't been watching for it. Zero decided to pretend not to notice her slip up. To her credit, Vivian didn't panic or try to come up with reasons why Meier might have thought it not worth removing respawn time other than that anyone who died would be dead permanently anyway.

Seemingly deciding that it was best to change the topic, Vivian asked something he'd hoped she wouldn't say.

'Could I have a look at the footage of your deaths, perhaps?'

Zero cringed. It was a natural thing for her to say, whatever way he looked at it- she wanted to know whether he'd been killed by a blackhead or had killed himself- if the first, then it suggested that perhaps the blackhead's deaths weren't entirely fatal, and if the latter, then it might suggest that he knew that the blackhead deaths were fatal. He couldn't refuse either without looking suspicious.

'Sure,' he said, and transmitted the footage over. She stiffened slightly while watching it, and then nodded.

'That's fine,' she said. 'Say,' she added, 'How about I see you at mine for dinner later? Or, uh, breakfast, given that it's now, like, 3 in the morning.'

'Sure,' Zero said.

After deciding on a time, he walked away, his head spinning with worries and plans. One thing popped into his head- Vivian was right, his internal clock was screwed over big time. The events of the past couple of days, plus dying, had left him out of sync. It was just a result of the life they all lived, he supposed.

2

Gigolo hadn't been back to his apartment since respawning. He'd gone for a stroll, telling himself it was to clear his head, and had ended up wandering aimlessly around the base, watching people walk- or, as was becoming more common, run- past. He'd be the first to admit he wasn't a poetic person, but something about the ambiance, the life of the clan, made him want to write something meaningful. It didn't help that he wanted to address it to Elesa.

Why is this happening to me? He wondered, pausing for a moment as a group of Spartans wheeling weapons racks hurried past. He'd had a few flings with girls in the past, but this was the first time he'd been so hung up on one. And for it to be Elesa, of all people! There was nobody he was less likely to be able to get in the world; which was, he reflected, probably part of the reason he was so interested in her.

It couldn't have come at a worse time either, what with his scheme to remove Zero coming along and this new threat, the blackheads. Not that he thought they were much of a threat, having soundly thrashed them a few times- hell, Elesa was probably more of a threat to his health than they were.

'Love,' said a mature looking spartan walking by. He winked when Gigolo flinched, having been startled.

'Not quite,' Gigolo replied. The other spartan chuckled as he walked on. Gigolo grimaced. He'd been standing by the wall again, staring into space, and probably looking like some love struck fool. That man wasn't the first to make a comment like that, either.

It was quite clear that he had to do something. Quite apart from the fact that he couldn't keep getting distracted, especially in battle- he had his reputation as a crack infiltrator to consider, after all- he felt a yearning for Elesa, like he'd never felt before. He considered for a moment. Atlas had a girlfriend, didn't he? If nothing else, Atlas would be able to give him an idea of what not to do.

Atlas opened the door quickly when Gigolo rang, looking slightly disappointed that he wasn't seeing Midori in front of him. 'Sup?' he asked.

'I need some advice,' Gigolo said. 'It's about Elesa-'

'Could you keep it short?' Atlas broke in. 'Only, I'm meeting Midori in 5 minutes.'

Gigolo frowned. It wasn't like Atlas to put Midori before his friend. 'Well, I just can't stop thinking about her. I've got to do something. Hey, where are you going?' Atlas had disappeared back inside his apartment for a moment, reappearing with a pair of shoes.

'Just ask her out,' Atlas said, pulling his shoes on. He looked at them critically, then sighed and pulled them off. 'I think she'd like the other pair more.'

'Dude! Focus!' Gigolo shouted. 'My problem, yes?'

'Sorry man,' Atlas said, grabbing another pair of shoes and pulling them on. 'I'm in a hurry. But tell me how it goes, okay?' He stepped into the corridor, pulled his door shut and began jogging towards the elevators.

'Dude- oh, you're no help at all,' Gigolo said. 'I'll remember this next time you need a hand!' he shouted after his friend.

What advice had Atlas given him? Just go for it? That might work. 'Yeah,' Gigolo muttered, 'If I want to get it thrown in my face.' He sighed. Maybe a walk would help him clear his head. He started off again in the opposite direction to the elevator.

After some more time, Gigolo found himself wandering into the vertical park. He found a bench and sat heavily on it. A few other Spartans were walking around- most, he noticed, in pairs. Gigolo tried to think, but soon found himself growing restless. Feeling a need to keep moving he jumped up and began to walk on, only to find himself walking straight into the one person he both wanted to see and run away from.

'Excuse me,' Elesa said, glaring at him. She pushed past him. Gigolo turned, stretching an arm out to grab her.

'Wait!' Gigolo shouted. 'I mean, I have something to say,' Elesa turned and stared at him. He swallowed. 'Look, I'm sorry about what happened the other day, when I tried to kiss you.'

'You mean you're sorry I didn't let you.' Elesa replied.

'No! Well, yes, but that's not what I'm saying dammit!' Gigolo said, exasperated. He rubbed his forehead. 'I'm sorry. My actions were wrong.'

'Yes, they were,' Elesa replied. 'Was that all?' Gigolo was shocked. Was that it? 'Then I'll be going.' She pulled her arm way from his and started walking again. Gigolo snapped out of his stupor and ran after her.

'At least acknowledge my apology,' Gigolo said, catching up.

'I did. You were wrong.'

'Not like that!' Gigolo cried. 'Say you forgive me, or something.'

'Will that make you stop following me?' Elesa asked. 'Then I forgive you.' She continued walking, not looking at Gigolo. 'You're still following me.'

'You're not supposed to say it because you want someone to go away!' Gigolo said angrily.

'Then what do you want me to say?'

'Just- just say it like you mean it.'

'Oh, for the love of- since when do you ever care?' Elesa stopped abruptly and turned around. 'I forgive you, Gigolo, for your wrongdoing. Happy now?'

Gigolo sighed. He supposed that was about as good as he was going to get. Elesa apparently took his momentary silence as assent, as she turned and continued walking.

'Hey! I'm not finished yet,' he cried, and once more ran after her.

'I wasn't aware I needed your permission to leave,' Elesa replied.

'I wanted to ask you something,' Gigolo said.

'I don't care.'

'Just stop and listen to me!' Gigolo shouted. A few people turned to stare at him. He glared at them.

Elesa stopped walking and stared impatiently at him.

'Look, we got off on the wrong foot. I can see that now.'

'Even a blind man sees what is in front of his nose eventually,' Elesa said.

'And I'm sorry for that,' Gigolo continued, ignoring Elesa. 'But I want another chance. With you.'

'Why me? Why pick to go after someone who hates you?'

'I don't know, dammit!' Gigolo shouted. 'I just can't stop thinking about you, and it's driving me crazy!'

Elesa looked taken aback. Oh, I went and put my foot in it big time. '_Shit, that wasn't what I meant to say at all-'

'Gigolo,' Elesa interrupted. 'Right now, I hate you. You are exactly the sort of person I would never willingly spend time with. But you can change.'

'Why should I change for you?' Gigolo asked, angry.

'Because you want me, but I don't want you,' Elesa said.

'What does that mean?'

'You like me as I am, or so you claim. I hate you as you are. Normal relationships need both members to like each other.'

'So you say you won't even consider me?'

'Not as you are, no,' Elesa said. 'I see no reason why I should when you refuse to change.'

Gigolo put up his hands. 'Fine. How should I change, then?'

Elesa shook her head. 'If you can't see how you should change, then you'll never be able to.' Without another word she walked away, leaving Gigolo confused and angry.

3

Harvey's bar had never had the stunning views or exquisite service some of the other cafe's and shops in the base had to offer, but in Midori's mind it didn't need them. It had respectful, quiet barkeepers, a clientele that kept more or less to itself, and above all else, decent alcohol.

It was over one of these drinks that Midori liked to sit and ponder about what had happened to her and what seemed likely to happen. This usually happened after the events in question; despite many resolutions to try and think before she acted Midori found herself often simply doing what seemed right at the time, and just going with what Zero, or whoever was leading them now, ordered.

On one level, Midori was quite worried about the new enemy- the blackheads, she'd heard them called- which put her apart from almost all of the rest of the clan it seemed. Gigolo and Atlas certainly showed no signs of being in any way afraid of the blackheads despite them being able to destroy entire clans. Aspertias was a big clan, certainly, and had already begun preparing defenses, but the threat was still there. It didn't help that it had been implicit, if not outright stated in the announcement that losing to the blackheads would result in permanent death.

Which was probably the reason why Midori found it so hard to take the enemy seriously. She had been brought up to believe that she would have at least 400 years of life ahead of her, and she was barely a tenth of the way through that. Midori saw it in the other Spartans; a disbelief that anything could harm them. She saw why, certainly- the very idea of having less than your allocated lifespan was unthinkable. It was something that was never questioned, never changed- it just was.

On the other hand, Zero seemed to accept it all to well. He had been acting weirdly during their mission a few hours ago. Midori was certain that he had done something that caused the explosion to kill all of them. But why? He could have simply decided that it was the easiest way of killing the enemy, but why do it so suddenly, and without giving any warning? It was as if he was hiding something.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the arrival of her boyfriend.

'Sorry I'm late,' Atlas said, pulling a bar stool over and sitting next to her. 'Gigolo grabbed me and asked me something about Elesa.'

'Oh? Has he decided to apologize at last?' Midori asked, turning to face him.

'I dunno,' Atlas replied. 'He seemed about ready to tell me his life

story, so I told him to go for it and leave.'

Midori rolled her eyes. 'He'll get the wrong idea, and you know it.' Although, she thought, it wasn't too dissimilar to what she would have told Gigolo to do in his place. After slapping him a few times first.

'Eh, Elesa will sort him out. Just between you and me,' Atlas said, leaning close to Midori, 'he seems almost lovestruck. Lovestruck! Of all the people I know, Gigolo is the last person I'd think could get hung up on a girl.'

'Of all the people I know he's the last person to care enough to get hung up on a girl,' Midori said. 'But if he does anything stupid, Elesa will thump him. She told me she utterly smashed him in a training battle she played with him.'

Atlas smiled. 'Yeah, I can see her doing that.' He grabbed a straw from a dispenser and stuck it into Midori's drink.

'Hey!' Midori said indignantly. 'Get your own!' She pulled the drink away, spilling what was in the straw.

'Oh, you wasted it!' Atlas cried. 'That was good stuff!'

'Hence why I was trying to drink it!' Midori cried back. Atlas grinned at her, and then burst out laughing. 'It's not funny!' Midori said. 'Now it's got your slobber in it.'

'You never mind it when we kiss,' Atlas replied. He rolled his shoulders. 'Anyhow, I had something I wanted to talk to you about.' Midori groaned.

'Please Atlas, not now,' she said. 'I'm trying to enjoy myself.'

'You don't even know what I want to talk about yet,' Atlas said.

'Oh, trust me, I do,' Midori replied. Atlas sighed.

'It's important. You told me how we're all in this squad because we messed up, right?' Midori said nothing, focusing on her drink. 'Well it seems to me that we're set to mess up even more. With Zero at the helm, we'll just keep on failing, like we did at Torchbearers. We fail enough, and we're out.'

'That's not true,' Midori said. 'Zero's not that bad of a leader. We've not messed up that often, and when we do it's usually because Meier's deliberately trying to make Zero screw up.'

'Yet another reason why we should get rid of him,' Atlas said. Midori groaned loudly.

'If only you could hear yourself,' she said. 'You sound obsessed. Every sentence you speak is Zero this or Gigolo that. What happened to you being laid back and cool with everything?'

'I found something important to work for,' Atlas retorted. 'I see you haven't.'

Midori shook her head. 'If you're going to blabber on about this, I'm going. I've had enough of this drivel.' She stood up. Atlas grabbed her hand.

'Hey- don't go! Look, I'm sorry.' He tried to smile at her. 'I just think that it's important. You'd be the same if you found something important to work for.'

'For pity's sake Atlas!' Midori shouted. 'Even in apology you drone on with this bullshit.' She pulled Atlas's arm off hers and stepped back.

'What do you want me to say then?' Atlas said, standing up.

'Something that doesn't sound like you're preaching to me!' Midori replied. 'Say something about us for once, not about you and Gigolo! This is his work, isn't it?'

'He's not putting words in my mouth,' Atlas said.

'That's even worse!' Midori replied. 'Well forget it. This crusade is yours. I want no part of it.' She took another step back.

'Babe, please just listen,' Atlas cried. He took a step forwards, then stood back as Midori flinched.

'Don't come near me,' Midori said angrily. 'Not until you've thought about who you're dating- me, or Gigolo.' She spun and ran out of the bar. Atlas stared after her, breathing heavily, a hand outstretched.

'What... what just happened?' he whispered.

8. The Breakdown of Relations (2)

4

Vivian studied the bottle of wine with the eyes of someone who knew nothing of alcohol. It was a gift from Meier for her help- a rare vintage, he'd said, imported from the eastern continent, where clans supposedly had huge fields of vines, producing wine to sell and help fund their wars. Meier had specified that she should drink it in small sips, to bring out the full flavor. Maybe Zero would know what he had been talking about.

Thinking of Zero brought a pang of worry. Something was up with him. Not just his actions towards her- that had been going on for a while- but in general now. She'd seen how he hesitated to send her the recording, and when she had watched it she thought she knew why. He'd killed the whole of his squad with a well placed grenade. It had ignited the coal seams, which messed up the kill tracking, and disguised the betrayal. The rest of the squad's deaths were marked as environmental. Vivian had talked to all of them when they emerged from the respawn chambers- a nervous wreck at the time, she remembered, certain that Zero was dead- and they'd been equally surprised. Midori alone had known the cause of their deaths, having been able to recognize the explosion. Although as a supposed

explosives expert, it wasn't hugely surprising.

The question was why he would have blown himself and his squad up in such a manner. The obvious and worrying solution was that he knew about the permanent death caused by being killed by a blackhead's blade, and had committed suicide to avoid this, something that had worked for Midori and Gigolo previously, even if they hadn't known it at the time. But how did he know? The ops room security was uncrackable, barring the possibility of an informant, something she didn't like to think about. Or he could have worked it out himself. Certainly it was becoming far more difficult to keep the secret hidden as more soldiers went and died to the blackheads, and Meier was going to have to reveal it soon or have it blow up in their faces. A third option was that he had got the information from his friends in the Universalist movement. Vivian hoped that this wasn't it. Zero had chosen to fight in the war 20 years ago, and she had stood by him, a move which cost her everything. Since then she had asked him many times whether he maintained his links with them and he had denied it every time. If he had lied to her all along, then she was going to have something to say about it.

Of course, it could have been an accident, or an attempt to kill as many blackheads as possible, or many other things. It could have been.

Right on time, the knock on the door came. Vivian calmed herself and walked to the door, opening it with a forced smile. Zero stood awkwardly outside, holding a bunch of flowers.

'Hello,' she said, holding her forced smile.

'Hello,' he replied. After a pause he proffered her the flowers. 'I picked these for you.' Vivian took them gingerly.

'Thank you,' she said, and pushed them into a shelf. 'I'll, uh, pot them later. Why don't you come in?'

Zero stepped inside and pulled off his shoes, nudging them into a corner. Vivian reached past him to shut the door and beckoned for him to come and sit at her table.

'Meier gave me this bottle of wine,' she said, placing it on the table. 'But I'm afraid I'm not much of a wine connoisseur.'

'An eastern wine? I had one a few years ago,' Zero said, picking it up. 'But I'm afraid I couldn't taste the difference between it and the local one.'

'That makes two of us,' Vivian said, smiling. Zero smiled back, and for a moment it was as if the years had changed nothing. But of course, they had, and that only made her more determined to do what she had to do. 'Just give me a moment, I have to get something ready. Why not take a seat?'

'Good idea,' Zero replied, sitting down. Vivian walked casually to the door and locked it to her voice, and then picked up a tray of biscuits from the kitchen. She walked back to Zero and placed the tray down. He reached to pick one up.

'Why did you lie to me about your involvement with the Universalist?'

She asked, her voice neutral. Zero's hand paused in mid air. After a moment he sighed.

'I've told you a dozen times, I have no involvement with them anymore. Why should I after what happened last time?' He picked the biscuit up and ate it.

'Don't lie to me, Zero.' Vivian pulled the tray away from him.

'I have not lied to you.'

'You have, and you know it. How else do you know the truth about the blackheads?' Zero froze, to Vivian's satisfaction. 'See? You do know.' Zero grimaced.

'I haven't lied to you- I have had no involvement with them.'

'Then how do you know?' Vivian asked. 'I don't suppose you just worked it out, did you?'

'I have had no involvement with them, but due to some mistake, I received a message some time ago from them, one which they didn't intend for me to see. It contained a transcript of a meeting you had with Meier and June about the blackheads.' Zero looked Vivian in the eye. 'That's how I know.'

Vivian was surprised. It seemed possible, and Zero didn't seem to be lying. But the thought that someone could have broken the ops room security was worrying.

'How did they find out?' she demanded.

'I don't know, I swear. I assume they had an insider.' Vivian nodded. It seemed to support her own suspicions.

'If you knew this, why didn't you tell us? You of all people know the damage this information could cause.'

'And what would you have done if I had told you? You'd have assumed I was still working with the Universalists. Not that it mattered,' Zero added bitterly. 'I should have known that you'd never trust me.'

Vivian was taken aback. 'Don't say that!'

'Why not? It's true, isn't it? You're in with Meier now, and I'm just an uncomfortable reminder of your old life, holding you down.'

'No! That's not true!' Vivian shouted. 'It's just... I care about you, Zero. I couldn't sit by as you got dragged back in to what ruined you 20 years ago.'

'I don't need you to baby me!' Zero shouted back. 'Why do you always assume that I'm incapable of looking after myself?'

Vivian shook her head angrily. 'You don't understand.'

'I understand fine,' Zero said. 'And I understand why you really invited me here.' With an angry shake of his head he got up and walked to the door.

'It's locked.' Vivian said.

'Unlock it. Please.'

'First,' Vivian said. 'What were you going to do with the information?'

'I owe nothing to this clan,' Zero said. 'It might survive, it might fall. But I'm not going to let myself die because the leaders can't get their act together and actually put some defenses together.'

Vivian sighed. 'You were going to run.' Zero said nothing. She wanted to shout at him. Instead she kept her voice low. 'You never used to run.'

'Look where that got me. Open the door now, please.'

Vivian unlocked the door. Zero opened it and walked away without another word. After a few moments Vivian walked over and closed it again.

'What am I to do?' she asked nobody. Nobody answered. Sighing, she walked to her phone and dialed for Meier.

'We have a problem,' She said when he picked up. 'The Universalists know.'

'I had a feeling they would,' Meier replied.

'What do we do now?'

'We'll hit the Rebels before they have a chance to get together. I'm not going to let those short sighted morons spoil everything we've worked for.' Vivian took a deep breath.

'I... have a favor to ask, then. It's about Zero.'

5

Atlas's apartment was small and spartan; with a bed opposite a television, an en suite toilet and a small fridge and basin. He'd never needed more; when he wasn't on a mission he was out and about or at Midori's apartment, and recently he'd only come back to sleep and watch TV whenever Midori wasn't around. Since buying it he'd not added anything and only kept the fridge stocked up with the most basic of food- why should he bother, when Midori cooked such a good lunch?

He found himself regretting not spending more time on it, though. It would certainly have made him more comfortable, and at the least he could have bought a bit more beer. He wasn't about to go and try and get some, not while there was a chance he might bump into Midori.

Thinking of Midori made his face hot. What right did she have to talk to him like that! He'd never been anything but a supportive boyfriend, always understanding when she had something that kept her away from him, and now that he had something else important to him,

she suddenly resented him for it? It was blatant hypocrisy, and totally unreasonable. With that thought he lifted the can to his lips for another swig, draining the last of the beer.

He tossed the can in the corner, next to the other few cans he'd found lying about his apartment. They stood out against his clean apartment.

But why, why couldn't she see how important this was to him? Why didn't she see how important it was to them all? Since he'd been transferred to the squad, he'd seen how bad it was and how poorly they achieved, almost never being able to complete their objectives, wiping out on missions and generally being the bottom of the pile in the clan. His old squad had been skilled and professional, and they'd worked well and completed their objectives without fuss. Decarabia, Zero's squad, was nowhere near as efficient. It had to be the fault of the leader.

Speaking of which, Midori had mentioned something about Zero a while back. She'd said that he was in the squad because he'd made a cock up somewhere. Hadn't he planned to find out what that was and use it to his advantage? He reached over to the fridge and pulled his tablet out of its holder. Squinting against the screen's glare, he logged in and set up a search of the clan's archives to pull anything related to Zero for him.

A few minutes later, the tablet emitted a soft beep to announce it was done. Atlas opened the search results and began skimming through the entries. Many were battle reports; mostly classified, some dating back decades. Atlas opened a few but found nothing of interest that he could read. A little way down was a news article detailing the appointment of Zero to a tactical advisory position. Atlas opened and read it. He knew little of Zero's past, but he was surprised he'd missed this. The article was dated from nearly 35 years ago and described how Zero was one of the youngest Spartans ever to be assigned as a tactical adviser. Could this have something to do with what he was looking for?

The article gave nothing more of interest. Atlas closed it with a sigh and skimmed down the list again. The next interesting thing was another news article from 25 years ago with the headline 'Tensions rise as Universalist talks break down'. Atlas read it and found nothing relevant in it. It was odd then that the search had returned the article if it had nothing related to Zero in it. He reread it to be sure.

The article itself was interesting even if it wasn't relevant. It was talking about two factions in Aspertias. The Universalists, the article said, desired a system where the military was answerable to the civilian side of the clan, while the Militarists wanted an independent armed force. The second sounded similar to the system currently employed in Aspertias, but Atlas had never heard of the first group. It wasn't entirely surprising- he'd only transferred to the clan 15 years ago, and had been a long way up north before then- but surely a group as large as the article made the Universalists out to be should have left some kind of legacy. What could have happened?

Atlas saved the article to study later, and continued down the list. A little way further was a report on prisoners taken in a month;

almost 20 years ago by the time stamp on this one. Why would this be in the list? With a feeling he knew the answer, Atlas opened the report. It listed a large number of names with descriptions of the situations they had been taken in and how long they were to be kept for. It seemed to be in alphabetical order, so Atlas scrolled to the bottom. There, second from the end, was Zero's name. Atlas leaned in closer and read the associated description.

The report detailed how Zero had been captured in battle at- at the vertical garden? Atlas did a double take. Why would Zero have been captured inside the base? The report told him that Zero had been identified as a ringleader of the rebel Universalists, and captured rather than killed for use as a bargaining tool. The report recommended 5 years minimum and demotion or expulsion when released.

Atlas began to put a picture of what must have happened. The Universalists must have started some kind of battle and been defeated; as a leader, Zero was captured and then demoted to where he was no as punishment. The Militarists had obviously won cleanly; the lack of evidence of the war and the rebels even existing was proof of that.

Atlas sat back, his mind whirling. Information like this held possibilities for him. This had to have been what Midori was referring to. If the rest of the squad didn't know.. well, Midori and Vivian probably knew, but it could sway Elesa, certainly.

His laptop emitted a quiet beep again, and Atlas glanced at it. A dialogue box had opened. A line of text lay within.

'I can help you with your problem. Yes or No?' It read. Atlas clicked the Yes button. Another box popped up.

'Transferring video file now. Send this to Meier and say you found it.' Another box appeared, indicating the file transfer in process.

When it was finished, Atlas opened the video and watched it. A smile painted his face. This would help him greatly.

6

In an apartment similar to Atlas's, if rather larger, Zero sat on his bed, trying to read a novel. He was finding it hard to focus on the book in front of him. His mind kept cycling through the same few thoughts- what would Vivian do- would he be able to escape in time- would the clan survive- giving him little chance to read.

Eventually Zero gave up on the book and leaned back, letting his disparate thoughts rush through his mind until he wasn't sure what he was thinking about at any one time.

It was a shock to him when his door was blasted in and 8 Spartans in full armor came charging inwards. Zero jumped up and tensed to fight; but was tackled by the lead spartan and thrown to the floor. Cuffs were placed on his arms and he was wrenched to his feet. With a metal boot in his back he was pushed forwards; a hood was placed over his head and he was dragged away.

The tactic clearly worked, for within a few moments Zero was disorientated completely. He found himself panicking and tried to calm himself but failed. He had no idea what was to become of him; his attackers had said nothing at all and he wasn't sure what he was being dragged away for.

Eventually Zero was thrown into a room. A door locked behind him, and then hands pulled him up and ripped off his hood. He was in an interrogation room, with a pair of guards standing behind him, rifles ready. Opposite him sat Meier.

'I always knew I would see you here again someday,' Meier said.

'So you fabricated a reason to make it come true?' Zero asked, trying to think clearly.

'Why would I need to? Vivian's told me all about you and your buddies in the Universalist movement. Just tell me,' Meier leaned forward, 'Why you decided to act now, of all times?'

Zero groaned. 'For the last time, I'm not with them anymore. I've had nothing to do with them!'

'Still sticking to that story? Maybe this will change your mind.' Meier turned and gestured to something Zero couldn't see, and a screen lit up. A piece of grainy footage showed him entering an apartment, and leaving a few minutes later. He recognized the area—that was Haru's apartment.

'This is the apartment of a known Universalist leader, and you are quite clearly visiting her. Getting some orders, perhaps, for your imminent attack on the clan that gives you food and shelter?'

Zero tried to rub his eyes, then realized that his hands were still behind his back.

'Yes, I met with her, but it was to tell her that I wanted no part of her schemes. I swear, I'm not working with them!'

Meier shook his head. 'See, I might have believed you, but Vivian informs me that somehow you know... our little secret. And as you probably also know, I can't let that get out.' He stood up. 'Even if you're telling the truth— which I doubt, by the way, I still can't let you go. And since you're lying, I'm going to have to lock you up.' He rubbed his hands. 'It was too much effort to get rid of you last time, but now we have a method of removing you permanently.'

Zero gasped. 'Please— I swear to anything you want, you're making a huge mistake!'

'No, I'm not.' Meier smiled. 'This is the best way it could work out. Just as soon as we've finished rounding up all the rebels, we'll chuck you all out of a pelican in blackhead territory and be done with you. And with you gone, Vivian will be able to work her best.' He nodded to the guards and walked away.

Zero tried to get up and run, but his legs had been bound at some point and he fell. The Spartans grabbed him and dragged him through the prison to the cells. He was thrown into a cell and the door

slammed behind him, leaving him in near darkness.

7

The door to the interrogation room opened and Meier walked out, followed shortly by Zero, being dragged by a pair of guards. Vivian watched with a heavy heart as he was led away. Meier strolled over to her, looking pleased with himself.

'Why couldn't I watch?' she asked as he approached, still gazing towards the door Zero had gone through.

'It was for your own good, Vivian,' Meier said. He shook his head. 'I know you love him. I'm sorry it came to this.'

Vivian frowned. 'I still would have liked to... to see for myself if he was really guilty.'

'I think the video proves that,' Meier said.

'I wonder how Atlas got hold of it,' Vivian said. 'Seems an odd thing for him to be in possession of.'

'He said he'd been researching up on Zero. He probably found it somewhere in the archives. Besides, he despises Zero. He has reason to be looking for this stuff.'

'It's still odd,' Vivian said. She sighed. 'So, what's next?'

'Vermillion are having real troubles, but we can't spare any troops to defend them. We'll have to send some evacuation birds and try and get as many of their people out.'

'Blowing the core as well?'

'That too,' Meier said. Vivian frowned.

'When they get here... you won't be able to keep the secret from getting out. If someone uses it against you, there will be an uproar.'

'I'm aware of that,' Meier said patiently. 'That's why I've been taking measures to remove anyone who could start another civil war. As soon as we find Haru and Marco we'll have all of their leaders in our hands.'

'All of their known leaders,' Vivian reminded him.

'It won't matter, trust me.' Meier stretched slowly. 'I have a favor to ask.' Without waiting for Vivian's response, he went on. 'We're painfully short of evacuation teams, so could you take the rest of your squad and help out?'

Vivian had a feeling he would ask this. He still didn't trust her entirely, and needed a way to make her prove her loyalty. It was an odd way to go about doing it, though. She nodded. 'Sure.'

Meier put a hand on her shoulder. 'Be careful though. I don't want to lose my best tactician.' He smiled. Vivian gave a weak smile back.

'You'll leave in 15 minutes.'

Vivian said her farewells and left, walking briskly to the elevator. She messaged the squad, telling them to be ready as soon as possible. If it was a test of loyalty, she wasn't about to fail.

8

From Aspertias base, the squad headed southwest across the blackhead controlled regions to the Vermillion base, on the edge of the danger zone. The base was situated on an island in a vast mountain lake, and was similar to Aspertias in its construction, with many towers and castle like features. As the pelican approached, Midori found she could pick out individual features - and the sea of black Spartans swarming the lower levels of the base.

The pelican swung in close over the base towards the upper landing pad where a large number of Spartans were milling around in barely contained chaos. Gigolo took a few potshots out of the open back of the pelican; Midori was dismayed to see that almost all of them hit. Where had all of the blackheads come from?

'Elesa, Gigolo, keep people out of the pelican,' Vivian said over the radio. 'Meier wants us to make sure we pick up the important people first; then we'll see who we can fit in.' The cabin door opened and Vivian stepped out. 'Midori, come with me.' Midori nodded and fell in behind Vivian. A crowd of people began converging on the pelican as they walked away; Gigolo cocked his shotgun and they dispersed a little.

Vivian pulled over a passing Spartan. 'We need to find Tomalon.' The Spartan shook his head.

'He's helping out down below, with the defenses.' Vivian thanked him and continued; Midori followed. 'But be careful! It's hell down there!' The Spartan cried after them.

Vivian broke into a jog when they reached the edge of the landing pad. She pushed open a door and hurried down a flight of steps. The sounds of battle became evident- gunfire and curses, and the swish sound of energy swords. Midori followed her past a few lines of defenses, hastily constructed, and then out into a courtyard where the fight was.

'Holy shit,' Vivian said. Midori felt the same. A few groups of Spartans were standing on vantage points, spraying bullets at any blackhead who came close, but beyond the seemingly arbitrary line where they stopped shooting was a huge mass of pitch black bodies. The blackheads were being funneled through several entrances, which allowed the defenders to keep the advance in check. But the sheer number of enemies made any hope of victory seem remote.

'Vivian!' someone shouted. Midori followed the voice and saw a man running towards them. He drew up in front of the pair, panting slightly. 'What are you doing here?'

'I'm here to get you out, Tomalon,' Vivian said. 'We need you alive.'

'I can't just up and leave!' Tomalon said. 'I'm their leader. They

need me here.' He turned to survey the defenses. 'Besides, we have them held back for now. I'll stay until all the civilians have been evacuated.'

'No, you don't,' Midori said, dread in her voice. She pointed at the barricades. A few blackheads were jumping over the funneling walls. As Tomalon turned, that trickle became a flood.

'Shit! Fall back! Fall back to the next line!' Tomalon shouted. The defenders scattered. A few unlucky ones were caught by blackheads and impaled on energy swords. The rest of them began falling back towards where Vivian and Midori stood, desperately trying to keep the surge in check.

Vivian grabbed Tomalon. 'We need to leave, now!'

'I can't abandon them,' Tomalon replied in an anguished tone.

'This isn't the time for foolish honor!' Vivian shouted. 'Your life is at stake!' She began pulling Tomalon backwards up the stairs. Midori followed, firing into the crowd. She felt some satisfaction to see a few blackheads fall to her bullets. Tomalon resisted, and Vivian slapped him. 'Damn it, Tomalon, you're important!'

Tomalon stopped struggling. 'To who?' he asked.

'To everyone,' Vivian replied. Tomalon sighed.

'I guess that's good enough.' He began to jog up to the landing pad. Feeling as though she had just missed something important, Midori followed.

The trio were jogging past the last barricades when Gigolo suddenly spoke on the open frequencies.

'You said what?' he shouted. There was a moment of silence.

'Gigolo, get off the radio!' Vivian shouted urgently.

'No, wait, this is important. This guy says that being killed by a blackhead is permanent.' There was a pause. 'That's bullshit, right?'

'Yes! Honestly, I don't know why you would believe such a thing.'

Tomalon grabbed Vivian's arm. 'You didn't tell them?' He asked, shocked.

'It's for their own good!' Vivian cried. 'Meier was going to make the announcement soon. He's probably already done it.'

'Vivian,' Midori said slowly.

'Yes?' Vivian replied impatiently.

'You left your radio on.'

Vivian stopped dead. 'Oh. Damn.' There was a moment of calm, and then the radio exploded.

'Are you serious?' That was Gigolo. 'Atlas! Get the pelican ready, now!'

Tomalon jerked into action. 'Run, Vivian! They'll leave without us!' Vivian made a small gesture.

'I locked the engines. They can't leave without us.' Vivian still ran after him, though. Midori followed, checking behind them. The revelation was unsettling, to say the least. Although more worrying was that they had been lied to. What else had the military been hiding 'for their own good'? The radio was buzzing with Spartans shouting, demanding answers, a few crying.

The trio sprinted up the stairs and onto the landing pad. At the far end lay the squad's pelican. Midori saw Elesa standing by it. She began to wave, but paused for a second before quickly drawing her rifle and firing past Vivian. Vivian jumped, shocked, and turned to see what Elesa had been firing at. A blackhead had made it up the stairs and had been about to throw itself at Vivian. The sound of running feet could be heard- and a mass of blackheads charged up the stairs.

Time slowed for Vivian. She drew her assault rifle and began firing blindly into the horde, jogging backwards. Tomalon pushed Vivian towards the pelican and drew his rifle as well. The crowd on the landing pad became aware of the danger and started to scream; guns fired, not all at the blackheads.

'Midori!' Elesa shouted over the radio. Midori turned and ran, pulling Tomalon and Vivian with her. They barged through the crowd. Indignant curses turned to screams as the horde fell upon the Spartans at the edge.

Midori reached the pelican and jumped in the back. Vivian and Tomalon followed moments later.

'Go!' Vivian yelled. The pelican started to lift off, giving Midori a good view of the landing pad.

In the close, cramped space the blackheads had a huge advantage. Here and there groups had managed to defend themselves but elsewhere the black Spartans ran free, killing multiple Spartans with each swipe of their swords. The horde cut their way through the crowd and reached the pelicans, charging inside, swords flashing.

The pelican lifted off from the pad and began to fly away. A few blackheads jumped after it, missing by meters and falling to their deaths. The rest of the horde continued the slaughter.

'That could not have gone worse if we tried,' Tomalon said, pulling himself into a seat. Vivian nodded wearily. She gestured to Elesa, who pulled the door release. The back of the pelican slid up, cutting off the view of the carnage.

'You,' Gigolo said angrily, bursting out of the cockpit, 'have some explaining to do.' He pointed at Vivian, who stared back.

'He's right,' Midori said. 'Why did you hide this from us?'

Vivian sighed. 'Isn't it obvious? You saw the reaction it caused.'

'Telling it earlier would have minimized that,' Tomalon said. Vivian glared at him, and he flinched.

'He's right,' Midori said. 'Besides, how long did you think you could hold something like that a secret? What happened to the people who died on missions?'

'This wasn't my choice!' Vivian cried. She shook her head. 'I was for telling everybody, but Meier said no, and Meier's word is law.'

'That's no excuse!' Gigolo shouted. 'This is information which could save lives, and you just sat by and let him send us to our deaths!'

'We've faced blackheads before,' Atlas interjected over the radio. 'How did we survive then?'

'You were lucky,' Vivian replied.

'We weren't actually killed by the blackheads either time, were we?' Midori asked. Vivian nodded. 'The first time, my rocket killed both me and Gigolo. The second time, Zero blew us up.' Midori paused. 'Did he know?' Vivian nodded again. 'How?'

'He's in league with the rebels, idiot,' Atlas said. Midori clenched her fists and glared at the cabin door.

'Wait- really?' Gigolo asked, surprised. 'Are you sure?'

'Have a look when we get back. He's in prison right now.'

'That's enough!' Vivian shouted. 'Atlas, shut up and fly. Gigolo, just shut up.' She leaned back in her seat, and then jumped. Moments later, a message arrived in Midori's inbox.

She opened the application up, and was surprised to see it was from Meier himself. It was a text only message, and read;

'All units, return to base immediately. Ignore any further communications.'

'Well, that's odd,' Midori said. Vivian stared hard at her, and Midori decided she'd best assume then order to shut up also applied to her.

'What did it say?' Tomalon asked.

'It's a general order to return to base,' Vivian said. 'Nothing to worry about.'

At that moment, a second message arrived in Midori's inbox. With a feeling of slight suspicion, Midori opened it.

'People of Aspertias, now is the time to rise up! The government has lied to you, mislead you over the threat we face. Meier has told you that the blackheads are nothing to fear, but we, the Universalists,

now know the truth!'

'Nobody read that message!' Vivian shouted.

'Fuck that!' Gigolo replied. 'You're not going to be able to censor this.'

Midori continued to read the message.

'The blackheads are the greatest threat the world has ever faced. Not only are they capable of eradicating whole clans, but they are also capable of permanently killing Spartans with a single slice of their swords. For anyone who knows people who have died in battle against these monsters, I am truly sorry. They are not coming back. But we can make sure that this doesn't happen again! We must overthrow the corrupt militarist government and install a new order, one which serves the people, not the army. Take up arms and fight for your freedom!'

It ended there. Midori looked up to see Vivian staring at her, a worried look on her face.

'I know what the message says,' Vivian began. 'And I know it doesn't look good.'

'Too right it doesn't,' Gigolo said.

'Shut up,' Midori said. 'I want to hear what Vivian has to say.'

Vivian nodded her thanks at Midori, and continued. 'Think before you act, though. You may not like the decisions Meier's government has taken- I don't. But they offer one important thing- stability. With a threat like the blackheads looming over us, we can't afford another civil war. We'll be destroyed.' Vivian sighed. 'Atlas, fly us back home.' She looked around the gathered Spartans. 'You have until we get back to decide who you will support.'

9. The Breakdown of Relations (3)

9

This wasn't the first time Zero had been in jail, so he was reasonably sure he knew how to survive it. But after the initial shock had worn off, the feelings he remembered from his last stay crept back- anger, resentment- and fear. How long did he have? He hoped Meier wasn't going to carry through with his threat. After all, not even Meier would presume to be able to control when someone died. Except, he remembered, he already had, by not telling anyone about the permanent death the blackheads were able to cause.

Zero lay in the near darkness for a few hours before unexpected sounds woke him from his thoughts. In the distance he could hear what sounded like gunfire, and shouting. He pulled himself off the cold floor and walked over to the small barred window of his cell. The corridor outside looked the same as always, but the sounds were getting louder.

Zero's suspicions were confirmed when the gunfire grew to a peak, and

the door to the prison was blown off its hinges. A group of Spartans ran in, quickly covering the corridor. Once certain there were no enemies, the leader pulled out some keys and began walking round the cells.

'All of you have been imprisoned here,' he began. 'Some rightfully, some wrongly. But a new age is dawning, and we, the Universalists, offer an amnesty from past crimes to any who choose to fight for us. What do you say?'

There was a clamoring from the cells on the hall. Zero added his voice to the shouts; he could always run off later. With a smile, the leader walked around unlocking the cells, exchanging a few words with each inmate. When he got to Zero's cell he peered in through the bars curiously.

'You don't look like you've been here long,' he said.

'No,' Zero replied. 'I was thrown in earlier today.'

'Looks like it's your lucky day then,' the Spartan said. 'What for?' He pushed the key into the lock.

'Haven't a clue,' Zero replied. 'Meier just didn't like me.' The spartan laughed.

'Sounds like him,' he said. The door opened. 'Suit up and grab a weapon. We're going to take the base from those tyrants.' Zero nodded and stepped out of the cell. The Spartans were leading inmates out of the prison and into the guard barracks, which was situated above it. Zero hurried in and found a suit of armor roughly his size, although without the modifications he'd made to his suit- with a pang of regret he realized he probably wouldn't be able to get it back- and grabbed a DMR and a pistol, slotting them both on his back.

'Good, you're all ready,' the leader said, walking into the room where the inmates had all changed. 'Our orders are to move to the center and take the elevator shafts. Let's move!' The inmates all shouted with enthusiasm and ran after him; Zero followed suit a moment later.

As soon as they left the prison complex the sound of battle hit Zero. Gunfire could be heard almost everywhere; their group passed a couple of fights, helping out where they could. From what Zero could see, the two sides were fairly evenly matched. He mentioned this to one of the Spartans.

'Yes, but with the element of surprise, we managed to take the core. Now we control the respawners, so it's only a matter of time before we win.' Zero nodded; that made sense. Of course they would go for the respawners first. The same thing had happened 20 years ago, only the rebels had lacked the power to keep their advantage. This time it looked like it might be different.

Presently the group arrived at the level's park, which surrounded the elevator shafts. A fierce battle appeared to be taking place between the rebels and the Militarists, who held the shafts and were deeply entrenched. The leader of the group called them to a halt just outside the fire zone.

'We're going to split into two groups,' he said. 'You, you and you-' he pointed to Zero- 'split off and see if you can see a way to get past their fortifications. The rest of you, follow me. We'll keep them pinned down. They can't last long.'

Zero found the two people he was supposed to be with and ran off in the direction indicated.

Now would be a good time, he realized. All he had to do was get away from these two guys and sneak to the landing pad and he would be free. He needed a plan. Looking around, a sign triggered a memory from some time ago.

'I'll have a look up here,' he shouted. The other Spartans nodded and carried on. Zero ran to a flight of stairs leading up to an apartment complex. The ceiling here was hollow, and had several water tanks- he knew this from some maintenance work he'd done as punishment years back. As long as it hadn't been changed, he should be able to climb through into the next level, where the landing pad was.

Zero glanced around quickly, and then took aim and fired into the ceiling. He heard a small boom, and then a waterfall came from the ceiling. Zero smashed his fist into one of the walls and took hold against the current.

'Hey! What the hell are you doing!'

The cry came from behind him. As the onrush subsided, Zero turned to see one of the Spartans trying to stand up under the cascade of water. Making a split second decision, Zero turned back and jumped, grabbing onto the hole in the ceiling. He pulled himself up into the cavity as the other spartan stood up.

'Traitor!' he cried, and opened fire. Zero threw himself to the floor as bullets flew past; he heard another booming sound followed by another rush of water and curses from the spartan.

Well, that problem took care of itself.

Working quickly, Zero shot a few more holes in the ceiling, stepping to the side as a chunk came crashing down. He again pulled himself into the hole he had created, emerging in somebodies bathroom. Zero opened the door and peeked into the living room, but no-one was home.

Praising his luck, Zero ran out of the apartment and into the hallway. After taking a moment to catch his bearings, he continued down the hallway and out into the landing pad complex.

Wreckage of aircraft and vehicles was scattered everywhere, but the area seemed to be in control of the rebels for the moment. Zero took a moment to compose himself, and then walked confidently out onto the pad. He ignored everyone else and made straight for the miraculously untouched sparrowhawk sat on the edge of the pad. His plan worked; most people ignored him in return. He snapped at the one soldier who tried to question him, and was not bothered again.

He was fairly surprised to see the sparrowhawk sitting there, untouched. He'd made arrangements for it to be prepared around this time but had expected the war to disrupt that, or at the very least

it to be nicked by someone. Having it still there was most helpful for him.

Within a minute he was in the air and flying south, straight for Nasces. In the confusion, nobody noticed his disappearance until much later.

10

The squad's pelican decelerated and held position a mile out from Aspertias, out of range of any anti air weaponry.

'Keep it steady here,' Vivian said. She got to her feet and looked around the pelican's troop bay. 'Come back here Atlas,' she said. 'I want you to have some input in this.' The door to the cabin opened, and Elesa saw Atlas walk out slowly, looking everywhere except at Midori.

'We have a choice to make,' Vivian continued. 'We must decide what we are to do here. We can take a side, or we can stay out of the battle. Whatever we choose, I want it to be unanimous.'

'I don't like what Meier did,' Gigolo said, standing up. 'But he's one of the few people actually capable of running this clan. Plus,' he added, 'he's the one most likely to win.'

Vivian nodded, and turned to Midori. She shrugged. 'A civil war helps nobody. Meier has shown he can protect the clan before.'

'Atlas?' Vivian asked.

'What Gigolo said,' Atlas replied. He seemed about to say something more, but eventually kept silent. Vivian turned to Elesa.

Elesa had thought long and hard about what she would say here. She believed that ultimately Aspertias needed Meier- it needed an independent military to be able to survive. The rebels might have good intentions, but placing restrictions on the military would cripple the clan in the long run. She had seen it happen with Vermillion- they'd fallen, not a huge amount, but a certainly noticeable distance, since they changed their government system. Not that anyone else needed to know all of that.

'I'll support Meier,' she said.

Vivian nodded, looking relieved. 'I'm glad you all chose that way.' She turned to Atlas. 'Fly us in. We'll help Meier's forces take back the landing pad.'

Elesa hoped they had picked the right side. She also hoped that it wasn't too late to fix the damage that had been done to the clan. If Vermillion couldn't defend itself united, then what hope did they have in pieces?

The pelican started moving forwards again.

'The defenses seem to be mostly under Meier's control now,' Vivian said. 'So we shouldn't have any trouble approaching. The landing pad is controlled by the rebels, however.'

'How do you plan on landing, then?' Midori asked.

'We won't. Meier has a force ready to take back the pad, but they want the air support we can provide. Atlas, I want you using the nose cannon to provide support. Elesa, see if you can do some sniping from the rear.'

Elesa nodded and pulled the hatch release down. The door opened, showing the base; Atlas was approaching side on. She sighted up; through the scope she could see innumerable small fights happening through the windows and in courtyards. She zoomed in one one, but found herself unable to tell who was on which side. It seemed as though everyone was shooting everyone else.

Atlas shouted something, and the pelican shook as he opened up with the nose cannon, spraying the landing pad. Return fire chattered against the hull, but did nothing. Elesa jammed her foot into a crevice to hold herself steady, and then sighted up again. She kept her focus steady as Atlas swung the pelican around for another run, and brought her cross-hairs over one of the Spartans firing at the bird. For a moment she wondered what was wrong, and then realized that no red reticule had appeared. She was, for all intents and purposes, team killing.

Why am I doing this? She asked herself. Because it is best for everyone, she replied. Resolve reinforced, she aimed and fired. The shot took the spartan straight in the head, throwing him back. Nearby Spartans gestured in alarm and fled for cover. Elesa emptied the rest of her clip, killing another two enemies- and they were enemies- and then Atlas brought the pelican around for another run. When she could see the landing pad again, what was left of the defenders had scattered, and were being killed by forces attacking from inside the base. Slightly relieved- she didn't like the idea of killing her own side- she stowed her rifle and prepared for landing

'Good work,' shouted one of the Spartans, a tall lady who seemed to be in charge of Meier's forces here.

'We couldn't have taken the pad without your help. I'm Faris, by the way.'

'Thank you,' Vivian said, stepping off the back of the Pelican, which was now sat on the edge of the area. 'What's the situation?' Behind her, Tomalon stepped out onto the landing pad. He appeared to see someone he knew, and hurried off. Elesa supposed he didn't particularly want anything to do with a civil war in another clan.

'We hold most of the exterior, and the higher levels. Unfortunately, we lost the core and the respawners when the rebels first attacked, so we're on something of a time limit.'

'As long as we can take it back before the first of the dead start respawning, they have no advantage,' Vivian said. 'How well are they entrenched?'

'Very well, unfortunately,' Faris replied. 'But that's where you come in, right?' she seemed to be sizing Vivian up. 'Meier said you would be able to solve the problem.'

Vivian thought for a moment. 'Who holds the elevators?' she asked.

'Nobody. We destroyed the shafts to stop the rebels from attacking the control room.'

Vivian nodded. 'That's a pain.' She walked over to the edge of the landing pad and leaned over, scanning the outside of the base below. 'Do you have any rope?'

'Yes,' Faris said. 'Why? Are you planning abseiling down?'

'Not quite,' Vivian said. 'Where's that rope?'

Under Vivian's direction, the squad and a larger group of Spartans tied themselves to the edge of the pad, measuring out about 20 meters. They lined up on the edge of the pad.

'Ready?' Vivian asked. 'Let's go.'

As one, the group jumped off the edge of the pad. The ropes quickly tautened, and they swung back in towards the base. Curled up, Elesa couldn't see ahead as they swung into the window of the floor a few levels down.

The glass shattered and the group flew into the room beyond the window, a meeting room. Thankfully the room was empty, giving the group time to untie themselves and get their weapons out.

'Hey, where's Atlas?' Gigolo asked suddenly. Elesa looked around- he was right, Atlas was missing. There was also a rope hanging by the window, one end looking very frayed. Gigolo spotted the rope and ran to the window, looking down. Midori followed him.

'His rope must have been cut by the glass,' Gigolo said. He shook his head and walked away from the window. Midori stayed there, staring down. Elesa walked over to her.

'You okay?' she asked. Midori pointed downwards. Elesa looked over and saw Atlas' body, spread on a courtyard hundreds of meters below. 'Nothing you can do now,' she said, and gently pulled Midori after her.

They had made quite a noise when smashing the window. Elesa could hear shouts from outside. She quickly took cover behind a desk as Gigolo and some over Spartans positioned themselves right by the double doors into the room.

The doors burst open and half a dozen Spartans ran in. They shouted in alarm when they saw the size of Vivian's group, and opened fire, but were quickly dispatched by the Spartans on the doors. When they were dead, Vivian waved her arm and the team hurried out of the doors.

'The core is a level down,' Vivian shouted as they ran into a hallway. 'We've to get through an office area and then down some stairs to reach it.' As she was giving orders, gunfire sounded around them. Elesa threw herself behind a wall as bullets ripped through the area she had been standing. The rest of the group took cover as well;

Elesa saw one spartan get shot through the chest, too slow to reach a safe area.

'We're too exposed from those guys on the gantry!' Vivian shouted. Elesa looked around; they were in an open plan office area, with relatively high ceilings. A pair of Spartans were crouched on a walkway that ran above where the group were taking cover, firing down. Behind her, Midori took aim and fired. The explosion killed one of the enemy and threw the walkway to one side. Quickly Elesa took aim and fired, killing the remaining spartan as he clung to the rails.

She had to duck back though, as a group of enemies approached from in front, using the desks as cover. Vivian's group fired at them to little effect; the returning fire did very little as well.

'We're pinned!' Vivian shouted. 'Move to the sides!'

Elesa started crawling to her left, around the area where the enemy Spartans were entrenched.

'I have a shot!' Midori shouted. She stood up and fired. Immediately she was targeted by a group of enemies and cut down. Elesa stared at her body for a moment, then moved on. If they lost, then she would start worrying.

'It's no use!' A spartan shouted. 'They've picked too good a spot!'

'We'll have to-'

Elesa never heard what Vivian planned to do, because at that moment the ceiling buckled and collapsed, falling inwards directly onto their enemies. Behind it came a platoon of Spartans, dropping down on ropes. Leading them was Faris. They dropped to the floor and picked off the rest of the enemies.

'Floor secured!' Faris shouted. She ran over to Vivian.

'Thank you,' Vivian said. 'You saved us.'

'Just repaying a favor,' Faris said. 'Besides, I got the idea from you.' Vivian nodded.

'We need to get to the core,' she said. 'It's this way.'

With the extra manpower from Faris' group, they were able to fight their way through the stairwells and into the core area.

The core itself was situated inside a huge cylindrical container, covered in wires and piping, which was itself situated in a vast chamber. Around the edges of the chambers were the respawning machines, and between there and the entrance to the core was an open killing field, the last line of defense should an enemy get this far. It would be a nightmare even getting that far.

Vivian's group quickly moved to the cover provided by the closest respawner, dispatching the enemies gathered around it. Elesa stuck close to Vivian, and overheard when Faris approached her.

'It won't be easy taking that,' she said.

'A straight assault would be suicide, yes,' Vivian replied. Faris glanced at her, a hint of a smile on her face.

'Do you have a better plan?' she asked.

'The defenses were made with the very reasonable assumption that the enemy wouldn't know the inner workings of the base,' Vivian said. 'We need to use that.' She looked around the chamber. 'Those pipes,' she said, pointing, 'what do they carry?'

Faris repeated the question to one of her soldiers. 'Coolant,' he answered. 'It's needed to stop the core overheating.'

'I'm sure one pipe wouldn't make a difference,' Vivian said. 'Can you shut it off?' The soldier nodded reluctantly and ran off to make the adjustments.

Elesa saw Faris was getting a little restless. She looked as though she was dying to ask what Vivian was planning, but didn't want to appear rude. Finally she gave in.

'What is it you're going to do?'

'Those pipes are hollow,' Vivian said with a smile -and Elesa realized that she had also been waiting for Faris to ask the question- 'and look large enough to crawl in. They lead into the core area, as well. A team could go in, capture the area and defend it while our outside team pushes them towards it.'

'Trap them between two forces, you mean?' Faris asked. Vivian nodded. At that moment the soldier returned, telling them it was finished.

'All right,' Vivian began. 'Gigolo, Elesa, you go with the team Faris is putting together and infiltrate through the pipe. The rest of you, come with me and take their attention.'

Elesa found Faris and got directions to the opened pipe. She was at the back of the line, behind Gigolo. One by one they climbed into the large coolant pipe.

'It's about 200 meters to our exit point,' Faris said, at the front. 'Keep moving and alert me immediately if you get stuck.'

Nobody did get stuck, fortunately, and in about 5 minutes the team was at their exit point. The lead spartan pulled out a saw and cut through the top of the pipe, cutting down the line so that multiple Spartans could exit at once. When it was done, they pushed up, lifting the top off the pipe, and slid it backwards quietly. Elesa put her head up when it had passed over her to see that they were at the very top of the core chamber. 15 meters or more below them stood a small platoon of guards, who were mainly setting up defenses.

'On my mark, we move,' Faris said. 'Back half, move back and down that support strut. Don't fire until I say so. Front half, follow me.' Elesa found herself at the front of the back half of the team. She clambered out of the pipe and crawled carefully along it until she reached the strut, and then moved down the metal pillar until

Faris called for them to stop.

'Snipers, pick targets,' Faris ordered. 'On my mark- fire!'

Elesa took aim and fired, picking off one of the Spartans below. The survivors turned, shocked, to see the team above them. Elesa fired again, killing another enemy, before they started firing back.

'Get down there! Seal the exits!' Faris shouted urgently. Elesa ran down the strut and onto the floor. Gigolo sprinted past her, killing a shocked enemy spartan with his shotgun. Elesa swept her sight around the room, but saw that there were no enemies left. The team quickly sealed the exits, to confused shouts from outside.

'That's our bit done,' Faris said. 'Now we just have to wait for Vivian to kill the rest of those assholes.'

Suddenly tired, Elesa walked over to a wall and slumped against it. It felt like it had been a long day.

Note: If you have any strong feelings either way for this story, please take some time to write a review for it. Any reasonable feedback is welcome, especially negative feedback. Hit me!

10. Great South Road (1)

Great South Road

Only a few minutes had passed since Meier had triumphantly announced that his forces had retaken the core from the rebels, but already the mood in the people Tomalon passed had improved. Most were slapping each other on the back, joking and laughing about the short lived rebellion, while others seemed to be getting to work trying to repair the damage, which was extensive. Large sections of the base were in ruins, and the main elevator shafts had all been destroyed, which was why Tomalon was having to walk the long way from the middle levels to the ops room. He'd had to ask directions multiple times, as nothing seemed to be signposted, and a few people had tried to stop him when seeing his armor, which now showed a blank space where the clan decal would normally be. Thinking of that reminded him of how his clan no longer existed, which led onto the big question troubling him.

What happens if I die?

Of course, Spartans died permanently, eventually, but only after a good 400 years of life. Tomalon had 150 years left to live- he wasn't ready to die, not yet. It was as though a safety net he'd never realized existed had been removed from beneath him, and now he was teetering precariously on the wire. He'd never had to worry about dying before- if there was something which would kill you then you avoided it, but if necessary any Spartan would sacrifice themselves. Why wouldn't you? You knew you were just going to wake up 6 hours later, good as new.

Such weighty thoughts followed Tomalon up the innumerable flights of stairs until he reached the ops room, which seemed to have escaped any of the fighting. The usual faces were manning desks and workstations, although the usual babble of voices seemed subdued for some reason.

'Can I help you?' The receptionist asked, looking pointedly at the lack of a clan emblem on Tomalon's armor.

'Yes, actually,' Tomalon said, walking over. 'I need to see Meier.'

'He's busy. Said nobody was to disturb him.'

'Just tell him it's Tomalon, from Vermillion,' Tomalon said. The receptionist shrugged and spoke quickly into an intercom. Her eyebrows raised.

'Seems like you know the magic words,' she said. 'He'll see you now. 4th on the left.' Tomalon thanked her and hurried in the direction indicated.

'So you made it,' Meier said, glancing up from a map of the northern continent to see Tomalon. 'We lost contact with everything in Vermillion. Sorry.'

'I already knew,' Tomalon said. He pointed to his bare armor. Meier peered at it.

'As we thought. You have no clan tie.' Meier frowned. 'Do you feel any different?'

'Not physically. It's just a shock realizing that- that if I die now, I don't come back.'

'That isn't surprising. The psychologists told me that there would be mental issues associated with this- humans aren't meant to be in a situation where they can die permanently.' Meier sighed. 'Anyway, there is a solution. We should be able to induct you into Aspertias.'

'Does that work?'

'It has up until now. We've been getting a stream of refugees from the clans that have fallen, and we've managed to add all of them to our ranks.'

Tomalon smiled. 'That's a huge relief.'

'Yeah, yeah,' Meier said, nodding. 'Get yourself down to the core and we'll get you set up'

'I'll do just that,' Tomalon said, leaving. 'Oh, and if you see Vivian, tell her I said thanks.'

'Stick around a minute and you can tell her yourself,' Meier said. 'And I think you'll be just one of many wanting to congratulate her.'

2

The entrance to the ops room seemed almost like a home to Vivian; so frequently had she been in and out the past few days. She nodded to the familiar faces on the desks, and was surprised to see them stand up and start walking towards her, smiles on their faces.

'Here's the woman of the hour!' A captain said.

'Word is, you're the only reason we beat those assholes,' another said.

'How do you do it?'

'You must give me some tips sometime, you really must.'

'If only all our squad leaders were as good as you!'

The sea of smiling faces crowded around Vivian until she began to feel slightly claustrophobic.

'Please,' she said, 'It's not that big of a deal...'

'Nonsense!'

'The best are always so modest, aren't they?'

The crowd seemed to have no intention of letting her go. Vivian glanced around, and saw two more familiar faces.

'Give the lady some space!' Meier yelled, Tomalon at his side. 'Go, get out of here!' The crowd dispersed, still crying encouragement to their hero.

'You really are something,' Tomalon said, smiling warmly at Vivian. 'I had no idea.'

'She's good at doing her job,' Meier said. 'That's all.'

Vivian nodded. 'And you wanted to see me as soon as possible, sir?'

'Yes. Follow me. There have been some disturbing developments.' Meier smiled wryly. 'Not that there has been any other kind since this whole affair started.' He began walking briskly towards the tactical room. Vivian followed, and Tomalon fell into step beside her.

'I wanted to thank you,' he said. 'You're the reason I'm alive now.'

'Don't be so melodramatic,' Vivian said. 'There were plenty of other dropships at Vermillion.'

'And I wouldn't have taken any of them,' Tomalon replied. 'I was ready to die for my clan, for real. But now I realize... I like life better.' He blushed. 'Sorry. I must sound so silly to you.'

'Not so much. There are many things worth dying for. There are even some worth dying permanently for. Your clan is one of them.'

Tomalon nodded. 'I wonder how many feel the same way.'

'Hurry up!' Meier shouted. Vivian quickened her pace, leaving Tomalon behind. He was a clan leader, like Meier, but the polar opposite. He cared about his people far more than Meier. On the other hand, Meier

was the one who still had a clan at all.

Vivian entered the room and took her position by the map table. Tomalon tried to follow, but was stopped by Meier.

'You need to get down to the core and be registered,' Meier said. 'You can come back when that's done.' Tomalon stopped in his tracks.

'I'd rather not miss anything. I'll go later,' he said.

'You'll go now,' Meier replied firmly. 'If you keep putting it off what happens when you die and you still haven't been registered?'

'What, that I'll die inside the base? I'll take my chances, thanks.' He tried to push into the room, but Meier planted himself in Tomalon's way.

'That was an order. We're not equals anymore, Tomalon. You do what I say or I throw you out.'

Tomalon stared at him, shocked. He glanced to Vivian, who turned away. Eventually he conceded.

'Fine.' Without another word he turned and strode away. With a tut Meier shut the door and walked to the table.

'No comment?' He asked.

'It had nothing to do with me,' Vivian replied. Still, it was a bit harsh. Meier didn't need to show his authority quite that strongly.

'He likes you, you know.' Vivian turned sharply to Meier.

'What?'

'He liked the look of you when he saw you at that meeting the other day, or so he told me afterward. I think you saving his life turned that to love.'

'And I think you're better at warfare than romance,' Vivian replied. 'Where do we begin?'

Meier shuffled some papers. 'First, I want to get something out of the way. You're bound to find out sooner or later anyway, so I'll just tell you. We lost Zero.'

'Lost him?' Vivian asked, surprised. 'How? Where?'

'The rebels hit the prison during the war. Zero was released and it looks like he joined them, but he's not among the ones we killed. So either he's still here, hiding, or he fled.'

'He fled, I'm sure of it,' Vivian said. 'He was going to run anyway, I think.'

'Well, a number of the other ringleaders are also missing, so chances

are they're together.' Meier said. 'You wouldn't have any idea where he might have gone, would you?'

'Nasces. He'll be looking for a way off the continent, to get as far away as possible.' Vivian stood up.

Meier sighed. 'Vivian, I forbid you to go after him.'

'Sir, please let me go. I need to hear his explanation for this.'

'No, and that's final. We can't spare you, Vivian. I should never have let you leave to go to Vermillion- look what happened when you were gone!'

'You know me being here wouldn't have prevented the rebellion.'

'No,' Meier replied, 'but it might well have made it less of a disaster.' He shook his head. 'Well, nothing we can do about that now. And speaking of disasters,'- he turned to the table- 'lets see if we can prevent the next one.'

Vivian walked to the other side of the table. Meier fiddled with some controls and the image zoomed to a display of the base and the area around it.

'What's our situation at the moment?' Vivian asked.

'Bad. We've been steadily losing people to the blackheads anyway, and the rebellion has left us severely undermanned. We're down two, maybe three thousand Spartans.'

Vivian gasped. 'That many dead already?'

'They're not all dead. I included the fuckers who rebelled against us. When they respawn, if they haven't already, they're going. There's no way I'm chancing them rebelling again.'

'Are you sure that's wise? Why not just make an example of the ringleaders?'

'Two reasons. Firstly, the leaders escaped. Marco and Haru were seen fleeing south when the battle started to go our way.'

'And the second?' Vivian prompted.

'Vermillion was a disaster, yes. But not all of the evacuations went so badly. We've picked up nearly two thousand troops from other clans. We won't need the rebels now that we have them- and they're mostly grateful to us for saving them, so I doubt they'll be rebelling anytime soon.'

'So we're not that badly undermanned after all,' Vivian said. 'So what's the big deal?'

'It's easier to show you,' Meier said. He zoomed in on the base of the Aspertias tower, at the valley floor. 'This is where the blackheads are probably going to attack. We rarely use it or the other lower levels, but there are large elevators and ramps for

getting vehicles into the base from the valley.'

'So we put defenses there?'

'We had already put some in there, but some idiot decided to stand and fight there. They're in ruins now. I've started to organize some repair teams but it's going slowly.'

'How long until the blackheads arrive?' Vivian asked, suspecting that she wouldn't like the answer. Meier fiddled with the controls some more and another map appeared of the area around the base. The red circle indicating the expansion of the OCP was touching Aspertias base.

'They should be here now,' Meier said.

'Then we need to get a move on,' Vivian said. 'Anyone who isn't doing something vitally important- get them down to the bottom of the base and installing defenses, or repairing the vital parts of the base, like the elevator. Those rebels you spoke about earlier- find the ones who don't really believe and tell them that if they work on the defenses you'll let them back into the clan.'

Meier nodded. 'Good ideas. They'll leave us without any offensive capability though, if all our soldiers are building defenses.'

'So? Name me a clan which is in a position to attack us right now. And besides, they'll still be Spartans. If someone does attack then we'll be able to defend against it just fine. Better, since we'll have all of our troops home.'

'Alright. I'll start implementing these. Anything else you might be able to suggest?'

Vivian scanned the image of the base. 'These defenses are good, but you're missing something. We need an escape plan, should the worst happen and we lose. Something that ensures a good number of our people escape, and the clan lives on regardless.'

Meier shook his head, smiling slightly. 'No. We won't run. We either win or we all die permanently- there will be no middle ground.'

Vivian glanced at Meier in shock. 'Why on earth would we do that? We gain nothing by fighting to the end, besides an early grave.'

'I said no, Vivian.'

'But you can't just say no! You'll be sending people- living, intelligent Spartans- to their deaths for nothing! What good will that do?'

'Quiet!' Meier shouted suddenly. He turned away from her, clenching his fists. 'I will not be remembered as the leader who ran. If we flee it will be as a shadow of our former selves- I won't let that happen. Death is better than that.'

'Not everyone will agree with you,' Vivian said quietly.

'Do you?' Meier asked. Vivian didn't reply. He sighed. 'Go. You've

helped enough.'

Vivian left, saying nothing until she was in the elevator. Then she let her breath out.

'I can't let him do this,' she said aloud. 'But how will I stop him?'

3

'This is such bullshit,' the spartan in red moaned. 'Why do we have to clear this stuff up? We have an engineers department, for pities sake.'

'I hear you man,' the spartan wearing blue replied. 'We're soldiers, not slaves. Why doesn't Meier just force those assholes who rebelled to do the work for us?' He turned to Gigolo. 'You agree with me?'

Gigolo shrugged. 'Would you trust one of them with one of these?' he asked, waving his hand saw.

'The man has a point,' the red spartan said. 'Still, I can't say I wouldn't rather be sleeping right now.'

'I bet that's what that lardy-ass Meier's doing,' blue said. 'You wouldn't catch him helping out with menial work.'

Gigolo tuned out of the other spartans' conversation, focusing on what he was doing with the saw. He was cutting away damaged pieces of support and dropping them onto a trolley to be melted down while the others replaced the beams and girders. It was hard work, but at least it kept him from thinking too hard.

He nearly cut his arm off when the spartan in red nudged him in the ribs.

'Do you think she's hot?' he asked. 'I think she's hot.'

'Man, there is no way she would be hot to anyone but you,' blue said. Gigolo looked up from his work and followed red's outstretched arm, which was pointing at another spartan working on the other side of the foyer. The spartan turned slightly, and Gigolo got a good look at her face. It was Elesa.

'Hey? Dude?' red asked. 'What do you think?'

'I think,' Gigolo said slowly, 'that they need me more. Be right back.' He picked up his saw and jogged over to Elesa.

Elesa either didn't notice him or ignored him as he approached. Gigolo stood awkwardly for a moment, then coughed slightly. Elesa gave a start and then turned to face him, a neutral expression on her face, which soured slightly when she saw him.

'Hey, I saw you working so I thought I'd come... say... hi,' Gigolo trailed off under Elesa's stare.

'That's nice,' Elesa said. 'Don't you have work to be doing?'

'I thought I could come and help out your team.'

'Oh, really?' Elesa gestured to her left. 'Get to work then.'

Gigolo walked to where she had gestured and started working again. After a few moments he looked at her.

'You were pretty good in the fighting,' Gigolo said. 'Put us all to shame.'

'Don't be so surprised,' Elesa replied, not taking her eyes off what she was doing. 'Vivian and I are the only ones who do any regular training.'

'Hey! I do training,' Gigolo said indignantly. 'We trained together the other day, remember?'

Vivian gave him a flat look. 'Yes, sadly.'

'Why sadly- oh.' Gigolo suddenly remembered how that session had ended. He cast around for another topic of conversation. 'How is Midori these days? You're still close with her, right?'

'She's still upset by Atlas being a jerk. Something that she, and I, blame you for entirely.'

'How is that my fault at all? It's not like I made him say what he did!'

'He picks up what you do,' Elesa said. 'You're a role model to him.'

'Really?' Gigolo smiled at the thought. 'I hadn't realized he thought of me so highly.'

'It's not a good thing, moron,' Elesa replied hotly. 'He caught your obsession with Zero.'

'Zero's gone,' Gigolo said. 'He's dead or he's fled. Either way, we're probably not going to see him ever again, so it's not a problem.'

'That's not the issue- oh hell, you won't understand.' Elesa looked away. 'Why are you even here?'

Gigolo frowned. 'As in, with you, here?' Elesa nodded. 'I guess I just enjoy spending time with you.' He paused. 'Do you like spending time with me?'

Elesa froze. 'I...'

A voice interrupted her. 'Gigolo!' Atlas shouted. 'I've been looking all over for you.' Gigolo turned to see Atlas walking up to him, a frown on his face. 'I need to speak with you.'

'Can it wait?' Gigolo asked. He glanced at Elesa, but she had gone back to working, intently ignoring Atlas.

'Why would it need to?' Atlas replied, either not seeing or ignoring Elesa. Without further comment he took Gigolo's arm in his hand and

pulled him up and away, down the hallway to a secluded area.

'You do know Zero was arrested, right?' he said when they were out of everyone's earshot.

'Yes,' Gigolo replied. 'Something to do with rebel affiliations?'

'That was thanks to me,' Atlas said. Pride shone in his eyes. 'I found some old news articles, dating from 20 years back. Some of them referred to a civil war that took place around that time.'

'There was a civil war?' Gigolo asked, surprised. 'How come I've never heard of it?'

'Aren't you going to congratulate me?' Atlas asked. 'I mean, I did just get Zero locked up and out of our hair.'

'Uh. Yeah. Well done, bro.'

Atlas frowned at him. 'What's wrong? Is it Elesa?'

'Uh, not really,' Gigolo replied. 'It's nothing.'

'Just ignore her, man. If she's bothering you then I'll talk to her for you.'

'No!' Gigolo said quickly. 'I mean, I'd better handle it. Not that there is anything. Well, I'd best get back to work.'

Atlas nodded, the frown back on his face. 'Be careful dude.' He walked off again.

Gigolo stood for a moment, watching his friend leave. Why do I feel bad all of a sudden? Not sure what he felt anymore, he turned and returned to his work.

4

Midori had never been to Vivian's apartment before, but she knew roughly where it was. After stopping a few passers by to ask directions she eventually found the door. She knocked in her quick, distinctive, style and after a moment the door opened, revealing a tired looking Vivian.

'Good morning Midori,' Vivian said with a pause to yawn. 'What brings you here?'

'I wanted to talk about stuff,' Midori replied. 'And it's past noon.'

Vivian blinked. 'Really? I was working longer than I thought, then. Come on in.' She walked over to her kitchen and put a kettle to boil. Midori followed her and sat on the sofa. Vivian took the armchair adjacent to it.

'What's this stuff then? Vivian asked.

'It's Atlas, mainly. And everything else.'

'Everything?'

'Yeah.' Midori looked around uncomfortably. 'You've probably caught on that Atlas and me had a go at each other. I ended up telling him not to see me again until he had sorted his life out.' She sighed, and Vivian reached out to hold her hand.

'You don't have to tell me if it's hard for you,' she said.

'Thanks, but I'm alright. Atlas has been acting strangely for the past couple of days. I think he caught whatever it was that was possessing Gigolo, because he's barely talked about anything else but Zero since.'

Vivian nodded. 'I can understand how you feel. Zero hasn't been acting normal since... well, for several years now.' She gave a pained laugh. 'I suppose that's his normal now.'

'How do you mean?' Midori asked. She knew little about Zero and Vivian's history together.

'He used to be... so much more. He was a natural leader- charismatic, strong, liked by almost everyone. I thought I was so lucky to have him. After the civil war 20 years ago, he changed. I don't know why. I probably never will.' Vivian shook her head. 'But you didn't come here to listen to me talk about Zero.'

'I don't mind,' Midori replied, although she knew better than to press Vivian for any more information. It would be rude, and disrespectful to Vivian. 'Atlas is obsessed by Zero now. It's like there isn't room in his head for anything else- not even me.'

'He blames Zero for everything, I think.'

Midori nodded. 'Even the things that Zero had nothing to do with.' She looked Vivian in the eye. 'Make no mistake, I think Zero can be found at the root of a lot of problems. Atlas has never been like this before. It's Zero's influence, his and Gigolo's.'

'Do you blame Zero for Atlas's problem?' Vivian asked, looking surprised. 'That's like blaming the murder victim because the murderer wouldn't have murdered if the victim hadn't been there.'

Midori shook her head. 'No, it's not. You know Atlas. When has he ever done something like this? Although,' She continued, 'It's probably better not to talk to you about Zero.'

'Hey, that's unfair,' Vivian replied hotly. 'Zero's not my idol. He's done enough shit to me in the past.'

She sighed. 'But you're right, at least in some respects. You know Zero got arrested, right?'

'Yeah. Nobody told us why, though.'

'He was working with the rebels,' Vivian said. 'I ratted him out to Meier.'

There was a pause. After a moment, Midori spoke. 'You did the right

thing.'

'Did I?' Vivian asked. 'He escaped in the confusion, and now I'll probably never see him again.'

'Do you... do you still love him?'

'No.' Vivian said firmly. 'I realized it after I heard he'd gone. I don't love him anymore, and I don't know if I ever can again. But I still need closure. I need to hear his side of the story, at least.' She took a deep breath. 'Midori.'

'Yes?'

'Promise me you'll talk to Atlas again. Hear his side of the story. Whatever you decide in the end, you'll be glad you did. There is no regret deeper in life than losing someone without finishing what you started.'

Midori nodded. 'I will. Thank you, Vivian.' She stood. 'I'll leave you to your sleep.' Midori let herself out quietly.

11. Great South Road (2)

5

Nasces sprawled ahead of Zero, a gleaming silver jewel against the turquoise of the northern channel sea. He vaguely remembered the layout from the handful of times he had been there. Hopefully it hadn't changed much in 25 years.

Zero was searching for some old contacts he had in the city. Now that he was on the run, he needed somewhere to stay until he could work out what to do next. He didn't plan on staying there long- if the northern clans couldn't hold back the blackheads, Nasces wouldn't stand a chance. He needed to move quickly.

He flew the sparrowhawk up and over the edge of the city, out of range of any excitable clans who might choose to take a shot at an unknown aircraft. The city was a boiling mess of different clans, many at constant war, and the borders of their territories changed continuously. It made tracking down any particular person or clan difficult, to say the least.

Zero didn't particularly want to attract attention, so he set the Sparrowhawk's net link to open receive and started flying in a grid pattern over the city. As he passed clan bases the computer would detect their network and inform him, which he would then check against his small list of clans he trusted to help him.

After an hour of searching he began to get frustrated. Some of his contacts were nearly 50 years old, yes, but he couldn't believe that all of them would have vanished in that time. As he began to think about giving up and trying a different method, a name came up on his computer which he recognized instantly; the Black Runners, a clan he had worked with some time ago. The signal was coming from the upper floors of a skyscraper at the southern edge of the city, by the port districts. He angled the sparrowhawk towards the origin and started hailing the building.

'State your business,' a male spartan replied.

'Samael? Sam, is that really you?' Zero asked, amazed that he still remembered the voice.

'Yes, how did you- Zero? Wow, long time since I saw you down here.' Samael sounded excited. 'How can I help you?'

'It's a bit of an ask, but I need to stay with you for a while.'

'Oh, that's no problem at all,' Sam replied. 'You're in a sparrowhawk? I'll get you landing permission.' Green arrows appeared in the Sparrowhawk's HUD, directing Zero in towards the landing pad extending from the building. Zero landed the bird and jumped out, meeting Samael on the landing pad.

'It's good to see you,' he said. 'I was surprised to see the black runners still maintained an outpost here.'

'The north is full of opportunities for those with the skill to take them,' Sam replied. 'Or so the boss says. Most of the time we just sit on our arses and hope the locals don't try to attack us. Getting back here from the main base is a pain if you get killed.' He grimaced. 'Still, it doesn't look like we'll be maintaining a base here much longer. I assume that's connected to why you're here?'

'You've heard?' Zero asked.

'Everyone has, and some people even took it seriously. But everyone seems to assume that you northerners will handle the blackheads. Nobody has been making any preparations.'

'I'd thought as much,' Zero replied. 'As for why I'm here, well, I had a bit of a falling out with the clan leader. He wants me dead. Could you take me in?'

Sam looked surprised for a moment, and then smiled. 'So Meier finally snapped and tried to kill you? Shame, my wager was on it not happening for another year.'

'Funny,' Zero said. 'So what about you taking me in?'

'Ah. That's a bit of an issue,' Sam replied. 'See, we can't do that without a core, and the Black Runner core is still down just south of Solidade.'

Zero sighed. 'I should have known. Sorry for bothering you.'

'Hey, don't go,' Samael said. 'We can still work together. As it stands, Nasces is going to fall hard when the blackheads get here. I for one would rather that doesn't happen; Solidade is only a little ways south of here, across the straights.'

'My heart is warmed by your altruism,' Zero said. 'What do you want me for?'

'You have contacts,' Samael replied. 'Talk to them, get them to see

the full scale of this problem. We'll need allies to defend the city. Meanwhile, I will set about drawing up plans.' He gestured to his skyscraper. 'You can have any of our equipment you desire.'

'That's generous of you,' Zero said. 'Thank you.' He turned to his Sparrowhawk.

'You don't need to go immediately,' Sam said. 'Stay a while. You can tell us all about these blackheads and how to counter them.'

6

Elesa was training in the gym when Vivian found her. Vivian waited patiently while she finished her weight lifting, and then went to talk to her.

'Can we go somewhere more private?' She said. Elesa nodded.

'The toilets should do.'

'Won't people think it's strange to see both of us in there?' Vivian asked, uncertainly.

'What do you mean?'

Vivian sighed and followed her into the toilets. Elesa led her to a cubicle and leaned against a wall, waiting for Vivian to speak.

'I want to ask a favor of you,' Vivian began. 'It's quite a big favor, but I couldn't ask Midori and there isn't anyone else I really trust to do this with me.'

'You're going after Zero, aren't you?' Elesa asked. Vivian blinked.

'You know?' she asked, surprised.

'Midori told me about the advice you gave her. I guessed you might be taking it yourself.'

Vivian nodded. 'I thought about it, and I realized I have to see Zero once more. I have to see his side before I do anything.' She smiled. 'You're more perceptive than people think.'

Elesa nodded, seemingly oblivious to the compliment. 'So when do we leave?'

'As soon as possible,' Vivian replied, glad she had agreed to come. 'I had enough saved to buy a Sparrowhawk; it'll be cramped but it's the fastest aircraft we have. It will be finished in half an hour.'

'I'll put some things together then,' Elesa said. She moved to leave, then paused. 'Vivian.'

'Yes?' Vivian asked.

'You have considered what Meier will do, haven't you?'

'I'll deal with that when I come to it,' Vivian replied, her voice a lot more steady than she really felt. Elesa nodded. 'What about you? '.

'If this goes wrong,' she said, 'I'll make sure the blame doesn't lie with me.' She walked away.

I suppose that's all I can ask for when I'm putting her out so much, Vivian thought.

After she left, Vivian sat for a few minutes before also leaving. She went back to her apartment and packed the few items she felt she couldn't do without, changed into her armor and locked up. Outside, she took a deep breath. She planned on returning once she was finished in Nasces, but some instinct made her feel as if she'd never see her apartment again. It wasn't a happy thought; whatever the situation, she'd lived there for a long time and had developed quite a fondness for the room, and the clan around it. Quashing her doubts, Vivian set off for the hangar.

Elesa was stood waiting at the entrance in her armor with a small pack on her shoulder. Passing Spartans were giving her funny looks. Vivian just hoped none of them thought to report what they saw.

'Midori was out, so I left a message for her,' Elesa said. 'I just said I would be gone for a while.'

'That's good,' Vivian said. 'Is that all of your stuff?' Elesa nodded.

The sparrowhawk was sat on the external landing pads. Vivian walked to it, trying to look calm and as if she had all the authority in the world behind her. She climbed into the cockpit while Elesa squeezed into the back. Vivian had put a few modifications in the rear area, ones that allowed Elesa to control the turrets so that Vivian could focus on flying. The front mounted laser was still under her control, though. She performed a few quick checks and then lifted off, and set a course for the south.

After a few minutes of flying Elesa broke the silence.

'We're going to Nasces, right?' she asked.

'Yes,' Vivian replied. 'That's where Zero said he'd go.'

'It's funny,' Elesa said. 'Last time we went to Nasces we ended up facing the blackheads for the first time. I wonder if anything big will happen this time.'

'Maybe,' Vivian said. 'Of course, we didn't know what they were back then.'

There was a moment of silence.

'Vivian,' Elesa said hesitantly.

'Yeah? '

'When I was preparing to leave, I got this weird feeling. As if this

was the last time I'd see my apartment.'

'Really? I did as well. Isn't that strange.'

'You don't think there's anything to it?' Elesa asked, concern in her voice.

'Of course not,' Vivian replied. 'It's just a feeling.' In truth, she was getting pretty concerned about it herself.

'If you say so,' Elesa said doubtfully.

They flew on.

Vivian chose to break the silence again. 'So apparently you've been spending time with Gigolo lately.'

'He's been spending time with me.'

'Oh?'

'Yeah.' Elesa hesitated. 'I think he likes me.' Vivian tried to think of something suitable to say about Gigolo. 'I don't know if I like him.'

'Give it some time,' Vivian replied. 'It always becomes clear sooner or later.'

Elesa was silent.

They flew on.

The sparrowhawk was passing a dip in the ground when Elesa broke the silence, worry in her voice.

'Vivian, I think we passed something back there. It looked like a pelican, sitting on the ground.'

'Did you get a look at the markings?' Vivian asked

'They were scorpions,' Elesa replied. 'The pelican has taken off and is following us.'

'Damn,' Vivian said. She switched one of the cockpit screens to proximity view and saw that there was a signal following about 100 meters behind her bird. 'There's no IFF tag on here. Are you sure they were scorpions?'

'I'm sure.'

The screen started to buzz; they were being hailed. Vivian accepted the transmission.

'Aspertian,' came the voice, 'This is Commander Hodge of the scorpions. Disable your weapons and land your aircraft.'

'We have no quarrel with you Commander,' Vivian replied. 'But I have to refuse your request.'

'So be it,' the scorpion replied. 'Lucas, give them a warning

shot.'

The radar started to flash red, detecting a dozen missiles shooting towards the sparrowhawk from the pelican's launch tubes.

'Hold on!' Vivian shouted, and turned the sparrowhawk into a steep dive, releasing chaff. 8 of the missiles exploded behind. She pulled up again and the bird leveled out only meters from the forest below, and began to rise. Behind them 2 more of the missiles crashed into the trees. The last 2 followed them upwards, gaining quickly.

'I've got it,' Elesa said calmly. She fired twice from her rifle, destroying both missiles.

The pelican had held its altitude and was now almost directly above them. 'We need to get higher,' Vivian shouted. 'As soon as you can, fire everything at them.' She pulled the bird up. The engine whined under the pressure.

'They're firing cannons,' Elesa informed her quietly. Vivian looked out of the glass cockpit and saw small projectiles whizzing past. A thud behind her announced that they had been hit. They were totally vulnerable where they were; pulling up prevented any of their weapons from being able to hit the scorpion pelican. The situation was hopeless. Suddenly, Elesa cried out.

'They've stopped firing!' she shouted. Vivian looked at the radar and saw to her surprise that the scorpion bird was losing altitude.

'Shoot it!' she shouted back. There was a roar as the auto cannons opened fire, followed by a muffled boom. The radar showed the pelican falling freely, and then crashing into the ground.

Vivian leveled off the climb and swung the sparrowhawk around to give herself a better view of the crash.

'That was lucky,' she said. 'What happened to them?'

'I'm not sure,' Elesa replied. 'But when I shot it, the markings had vanished.'

'What? But for that to happen, then the scorpions must be...' Vivian tailed off. Could they really have been destroyed? And at that very moment? It seemed implausible, but then so did so many other things.

'We'll take a look at the wreckage,' She said. 'We can confirm what you saw there.'

She took the sparrowhawk down and landed by the crashed pelican. Several broken bodies were lying in the immediate area.

'They're dead for good, aren't they?' Elesa asked quietly, when they had exited the sparrowhawk.

'I... yes. I suppose they probably are,' Vivian replied.

'I just killed somebody permanently.'

'Hey, hey,' Vivian said. She walked to Elesa and took her hand. 'There was no way anybody could have predicted this. It's not your fault- just a horrible coincidence.' Elesa nodded. 'Will you be okay?'

'Yes,' Elesa said, taking her hand back. 'I'll be fine.'

Vivian walked around the pelican, looking at the spots where its markings would normally be. They were all blank, confirming what Elesa had seen. The corpses were all unmarked as well. As a last check she walked inside the pelican- the back was open and pointing slightly upwards- and into the cockpit. There was a spartan slumped in the pilots seat- and still alive.

'Elesa! This one's still breathing!' she shouted.

'What are we going to do with him?' Elesa asked once she was inside.

'If we leave him he'll die,' Vivian said. 'He's unconscious- we could lock him in one of the turret seats and bring him with us.'

'He's a scorpion,' Elesa said.

'Not any more,' Vivian replied, gesturing at his shoulders, now bare of clan markings. Elesa shrugged.

'If you say so. Make sure the lock is a good one, though.'

'Trust me, it'll be the best one I can find.'

Together they manhandled the unconscious spartan out of the wreckage and into their sparrowhawk. Once that job was done they took off again, flying southwards for Nasces.

7

Tomalon watched Meier pace up and down the small room, growing angrier with every turn. His eyes flicked every few seconds towards the doors, which remained shut as if in defiance.

'Maybe she just turned her communications off,' he suggested, in an attempt to break the stifling silence.

'All communication systems in this clan are programmed to allow my messages through at all times,' Meier replied, not stopping his pacing.

'Then perhaps she's away from any of those systems? In the shower, for example?'

Meier shook his head. 'Her room hasn't been entered in a few hours, the lights are all off and there is no power being directed to any of the appliances.'

Tomalon was surprised. 'You spy on your clan?' he asked.

'Not in the way you're thinking; we don't have cameras or microphones in any rooms. All of that I could tell from civil monitoring systems put in place years ago which anybody can access. Not,' he added,

'that anyone but me ever does.'

Tomalon sighed. 'I think you're taking this a bit too seriously-' he began.

'No, I'm not,' Meier said firmly, cutting him off. 'I gave specific instructions to Vivian that she was never to be without a communication device.'

'So she forgot this once, big deal. Everyone makes mistakes.'

'It's still an issue, and one I intend to bring up with her when she finally responds.' Meier kept on pacing. 'The way I see it, there are three options. One, she made a mistake, as you say. Two, for whatever reason she has been rendered unable to answer my summons. Three, she is deliberately not answering them for some reason.'

'Again, you're quite badly over thinking this.'

'There is no such thing as over thinking, only good preparation,' Meier replied gravely. 'The first option is possible, though I thought her above such mistakes; the second is also possible but I have not heard any of the racket such an event would inevitably cause; and the third doesn't bear thinking about.'

'Has it ever occurred to you that by stating that those are the only options you blind yourself to other possibilities?'

'No. What other possibilities can you think of?'

Tomalon, who had never been one for such thinking, floundered. 'You can't expect me to think of one off the top of my head,' he replied. 'You know I don't look at things like you do.'

'I believe that your refusal to do so was one of the reasons your clan fell,' Meier said.

'Meier!' Tomalon snapped. 'How could you- you don't know what it's like to lose your clan.'

'And I have no intention of finding out, hence my irritation that Vivian is not here,' Meier replied. 'Still, I am sorry. I know it is a sore area for you.'

Tomalon nodded his acceptance of the apology. 'Is she really that important to you?'

'I find I think clearer when she is around, and plans I draw up are better.' Meier sighed. 'I do not know how she affects me so, but it would be silly to not use it when the stakes are so high.'

Tomalon nodded. 'Yes, she is special, isn't she.' He spotted Meier smiling knowingly at him and reddened. 'Be quiet, you.'

Meier smiled. 'I said nothing.' He remarked.

'You thought it, I'm sure,' Tomalon replied. There was a lull for a moment, and then Tomalon continued. 'Have you done a ping to see if her communicator is still connected?'

'Yes. It isn't, which means it is either off, out of range or broken.'

'Again, not good options,' Tomalon said. 'How about asking around? See who saw her last.'

Meier nodded. 'Maybe her squad would know something,' he said. He brought up a list of the members of the squad on the table. 'I think... Midori would be best.'

After a few moments Midori answered the call. 'Good day sir,' she said, her voice clearly drowsy. 'How can I help you?'

'I need you to tell me any reason you can think of why Vivian might not be answering her messages right now,' Meier said.

'Huh? Is this some weird test?' Midori asked, surprised. 'She's out on some mission; Elesa left me a message about it.'

Tomalon caught Meier's eye; he made a shushing motion with his hand.

'Well done. What were the specifics of this mission?' he asked.

'Why are you asking me? Uh, I think they were going on a flight somewhere. Elesa wasn't very specific.'

Tomalon immediately brought up a list of departures from the airport in the past day; near the top was a sparrowhawk registered to Vivian.

'That's good enough, thanks,' Meier said. 'Get some rest.' He hung up. 'Damn.'

'Why would she have left?' Tomalon asked.

'She's going after Zero, something I specifically forbade her from doing.' Meier's face was like stone, his voice like thunder.

'That ass- what does she want with him?'

'Heaven knows. The man's a traitor, a scumbag and a wretch. I only hope he doesn't say-' Meier caught himself. Tomalon noted it, but said nothing of it. He knew better than to press Meier when he wasn't prepared to say something.

8

Once in Nasces, Vivian made a beeline for the clan she knew Zero would have gone straight for. After getting landing permission, she was met on the pad by Samael, an old friend of hers.

'Vivian! Zero didn't say you would be paying us a visit,' he said as he embraced her, leaving the unspoken question hanging. 'I don't believe I've met your friend?'

'This is Elesa,' Vivian said. Elesa held out a hand, which Samael took regretfully.

'Pleasure to meet you,' he said. 'What brings you here?'

'I'm trying to catch Zero,' Vivian said. 'I take it he stopped here?'

Samael looked at her suspiciously. 'Yes, he did. Why do you need to find him?'

Vivian thought for a moment. Samael, while a friend of hers, had always been closer to Zero than to her, and would probably refuse her request if he realized what she wanted. On the other hand, he would probably be able to tell if she lied to him.

'He left without giving me a chance to speak to him,' Vivian said. 'I need to ask him certain... private things.'

'Things to do with being his run out of Aspertias?' Samael asked. 'He did tell me,' he added, seeing the surprise on her face. 'He was looking for sanctuary here.'

'Where is he now?' Vivian asked.

'I'm not sure,' Samael said. 'I could give you his Sparrowhawk's ID, which would let you track him,' he tailed off.

'Will you?' Vivian asked.

'So pushy,' Samael replied. 'I will, for a price.'

'What?' Vivian asked through gritted teeth.

'Hey, enough of that,' Samael replied, upset. 'I was just going to ask you to come and talk with me a while. We get little news from the north, even here.'

'Quite,' another voice said. Vivian looked around and saw that another spartan, in markings she couldn't place, had joined them. 'It's something of a worry for some of us.'

Samael turned and smiled when he saw who the newcomer was. 'You decided to leave your books and talk to some real people then?' he joked. 'Vivian, Elesa, this is Alcor. He's from the Builders.'

Suddenly Vivian remembered where she had seen the markings before. The hammer and anvil belonged to an ancient clan called the Builders. The Builders had quite a presence on the central continent, but it had supposedly been hundreds, if not thousands of years since they'd had any foothold on the Northern continent.

'A pleasure,' she said, shaking his hand. 'It's unusual to see a Builder so far from Cressat.'

'The same,' Alcor replied. 'And that's what I'm ostensibly here to rectify.' He smiled at the two Aspertians. 'I shan't interrupt your conversation further... Vivian, but if you don't mind, I would like to speak to... Elesa, was it?' Elesa nodded slowly.

'Yes, why not?' Samael said enthusiastically. Elesa glanced at Vivian.

'It's up to you,' Vivian said. Elesa shrugged, and let herself be led off by Alcor.

'A strange spartan, that one,' Samael said. 'He says he's here to make contacts, but he rarely leaves his apartment, and never this base.' He shrugged. 'I suppose Builders have to act oddly, or else people would stop believing all the rumors about them.'

'What did he want with Elesa?' Vivian asked.

'Who knows?' Samael replied. 'Sometimes he sees somebody he's just interested in and he talks with them a little. It's always harmless. Besides, did you see him? I couldn't imagine him hurting a fly.'

Vivian nodded. With his white hair and innocent face, it was hard to picture Alcor fighting. 'I wasn't worried about that, just curious.' She focused on Samael again. 'So what do you want to know?'

'Not just yet,' Samael replied. 'Come on inside,' -he started to pull Vivian along with him- 'and let us talk over a hot drink. I suppose you're tired after flying so far. I'll have the crews fix up your bird, too, it looks a little beat up-'

'There's somebody in one of the turret compartments,' Vivian said. 'Lock him up somewhere until he wakes up.'

'A friend of yours?' Samael asked.

'Scorpion.'

'Ah. Well, we'll get all that done for you. As I was saying, we'll get you a nice drink and you'll feel refreshed in no time. I can't remember the last time we had some many visitors here. First Zero, now you, and there was that weird lady about an hour ago- same as you, asking after Zero with some Aspertias markings on her armor- what was her name again?'

12. Great South Road (3)

9

Elesa followed quietly behind Alcor as he wandered into the tower, humming to himself. He led her off into a side corridor and a little way down before stopping in front of a door marked 'Guest Room'. He unlocked it and went in, beckoning for Elesa to follow him.

'We can have some privacy here,' he said. 'Can I get you a drink?'

'No. Thank you,' Elesa said. She stood awkwardly until he took her arm and sat her down on the sofa. He took a chair opposite, a glass of wine in his hand.

'I'm sorry I dragged you off like this,' he said. 'You don't mind, do you?'

Elesa shook her head. She felt more confused than anything.

'That's good,' Alcor said. 'I've had little opportunity to talk to people from the north, and I hardly count Nasces natives as northerners- they're quite different to the clans up in the mountains. I take it that's where you come from?'

'Uh, yeah,' Elesa said. 'Aspertias is a few hours flight from here.'

'What's it like?' Alcor asked. 'The clan, I mean.'

'Well... it's nice.'

Alcor sighed, but Elesa could see a smile on his face. 'I suppose you probably have little to compare it to. Were you born in Aspertias?'

'No, I wasn't. I moved away from my home clan when I was in my teens.'

'Really? Down south it's unusual for anyone to move before they're at least half a century old- but we do things differently there.' Alcor paused. 'So what does the Aspertias base look like?'

'It's very grand,' Elesa said cautiously. 'It's made of massive towers, coming out of the side of a mountain.'

'So it's like a castle, then?' Alcor prompted.

'A castle...?' Elesa asked, confused. Alcor sighed.

'Never mind,' he said. There was a silence.

'So... what is your base like?' Elesa asked.

'My base?' Alcor said, surprised. 'Well, I don't spend much time there anymore, but it's quite impressive. The builders of old definitely earned their name.' He chuckled. 'It's a giant fortress- supposedly unassailable- that was built thousands of years ago. Over time a city grew up around it, which we now call Cressat. The clans of Cressat are all allied to the Builders, so there's little fighting. It's nothing at all like Nasces.'

'There's no fighting?' Elesa asked, surprised.

'Very little,' Alcor conceded. 'But Cressat, as wonderful as it is, is nowhere near the most impressive places I've seen in my travels. I've been all across the known world, up to the gates that seal off the very north from here, and across to the edge of the eastern lands.'

'Tell me about the gates,' Elesa said. Alcor smiled, and Elesa realized that the spartan really enjoyed telling his stories.

'I'd have thought a northerner like you would have gone to see them for yourself, but very well. The gates are giant constructions of some unknown material that is nearly indestructible. They mark the end of the northern continent, and to this day nobody knows what they were supposed to seal off. Aircraft have been constructed that can fly over them, or the impassable peaks that run from either side to the ocean, but beyond lies nothing but more ocean. I have heard

theories from those who would know of such things that they were created as doors to a colossal city which sank beneath the waves eons ago, but there has never been anything found which can prove its existence.'

'Perhaps they were art,' Elesa said, to which Alcor laughed.

'That is as good a theory as any other I've heard,' he replied.

'So who comes up with these theories?' Elesa asked. 'Don't they have more important things to do?'

'The way of life we have in the south is very different to how you live in the north,' Alcor said. 'I have heard, and seen, that people here live simpler lives- you wage constant war, and you survive, and indeed you are happy with this. People in the south consider themselves more cultured- a load of bollocks in my opinion, you simply have a different sort of culture to them- and as such there is less of a focus on fighting, something which is seen in Cressat. People there seek other ways to live. Some write, some paint, others put on shows or make music, and there are those who seek to understand the world around them. Such people make it their business to explain things which we cannot yet explain.'

'Isn't that a bit pointless?'

'Not at all. There was a man who spent his life investigating the properties of chemical explosives, and his work on that allowed us to put ships into orbit, and optimize the aircraft that you take for granted. Another developed the theory behind Blinking, something which many clans use for fast transport. All knowledge has use.'

'Are you one of them?'

'No, no. I simply travel and observe. When word of important events reaches the council of the builders they will often send me to watch for them, though never to intervene. We have others to do that for us.' Alcor stood up. 'Tell me,' he said, 'how old do you think I am?'

Elesa looked him over, and found that she couldn't tell.

'I am 320,' Alcor said. 'I have seen some of the most important events in the history of the world, and now I have come to witness the events unfolding in the north, events which you are tied to.'

'You mean the blackheads,' Elesa said.

'Right on,' Alcor replied. 'There are people in the south who are very interested in what happens from now on.'

'Why? I mean, I can understand them wanting us to win, but why not just send their own forces to help?'

'I cannot say. Sadly I am not privy to such knowledge, but there are rumors. The builders are an old clan- as old as the world, some say. Their original purpose was to preserve knowledge through the ages, though what knowledge and what it was for has been lost,'

ironically.'

Elesa laughed. 'Seems a bit useless, then.'

'Well, not entirely. Ideas are hard to kill, and myths have sprung up over the centuries. The most common ones say that there will come a point where the world will be placed in peril, and the clans will have to work together for survival. The information that the Builders were to preserve is supposedly advice on how to survive this ordeal.' Alcor shrugged. 'This is just hearsay. But whatever the truth, for as long as anyone can remember the Builders have been very interested in anything relating to disasters or the end of the world. Naturally, they are keeping a close eye on these blackheads.'

'So, why don't they do something?' Elesa asked angrily. 'If the blackheads are going to destroy the world, why do the Builders sit and wait? They must know that the earlier they act the better.'

'As I said, nobody but they know,' Alcor replied. 'But this is too much weighty discussion in such a short time. Are you sure you wouldn't like a drink?'

Elesa nodded this time and Alcor got up. She was still angry inside, and getting angrier. If they knew, why didn't these powerful clans act? It was as it had always been- you could never count on anyone but yourself. Aspertias would defeat the blackheads, by themselves if necessary. That would show the southern clans.

10

The repairs on the base continued throughout the day. A general schedule was established, giving everyone two hours work followed by an hours break. Nobody liked it, but for the most part everyone agreed it was necessary. Still, there were some problems.

It had been agreed that the place the blackheads would attack from was the very bottom of the base, where it touched the valley floor. The blackheads had been spreading along the valleys, and projections put them entering Aspertias's one imminently. As a result, defenses had been constructed at the bottom gate which were designed to funnel the blackheads into areas where it would be easy for Spartans to shoot at them without being in danger themselves. They had been nearly finished when the rebellion had broken out, which put work on hold, and then damaged badly when rebel Spartans decided to try and make a stand there.

The repairs went ahead, but nobody wanted to work in a place where they could be attacked at any time with little or no warning. As a result, the people assigned to work there were those that Meier's regime disliked most, or who they considered the most expendable.

It was therefore not surprising to Gigolo that he found himself on a shift there, late in the afternoon. Beyond the ever present worry of imminent attack, he didn't mind the work too much. It gave him a chance to think things over, something he knew he hadn't been doing enough. His thoughts wandered wildly, but in the end they came back to one person.

Elesa.

He supposed he was in love. He knew he was obsessed. There was no way he could avoid thinking about her, not that he wanted to.

Gigolo had given in to his feelings and gone searching for her. When he knocked on her door, Midori answered, and irritably told him that she had gone on some mission with Vivian. It frustrated him- first Atlas had spoiled their meeting in the hall, and now Vivian was pulling her away from him? It was as though the world didn't want him to get her.

With a groan of effort Gigolo pulled up the wall section and forced it into place between its neighbors. He snapped the joints into place and moved on to the next missing section.

The world could go to hell for all he cared, so long as he could be with Elesa. Although, he thought wryly, it probably would without any input from him.

Gigolo wasn't sure what he was going to do. If he wanted to survive, he supposed he was going to have to get to Nasces. He wasn't going to fool himself- Aspertias was finished. The problem was that the government had tightened controls on aircraft use after desertion rates skyrocketed. He didn't yet know how he was going to escape, but rest assured, he would. Gigolo always made it out.

He paused in his monotonous work as noises broke through his reverie. There was shouting coming from a distance away. Gigolo strained his head to see what it was about. What he saw made his breath freeze in his throat.

A wall of black Spartans was converging on the base from the valley. Gigolo couldn't see how many were behind, but there must have been hundreds in the first row alone. His hand fell to his rifle automatically, but what use would it be against such a tide?

Gunfire started from several points along the defenses, picking off the front line of blackheads. Gigolo raised his rifle and added his own shots to the fire, walking backwards as he did so.

The speed of the enemy was astonishing. In less than a minute they had covered half the remaining distance to the base, and showed no sign of stopping. Nor was the gunfire having any noticeable affect on the mass.

The shouting intensified, and the Spartans closest to the blackheads began to turn and run. Gigolo lowered his weapon and did the same. He sprinted towards the stairs leading up into the base, only to see them already crowded with Spartans trying to escape. That way would be suicide- he would be unable to defend himself in the crush. Turning, Gigolo was that the lead blackheads had reached the defenses and were cutting down the Spartans too brave or foolhardy to flee.

His eyes lighted on a service elevator between him and the blackheads and he made a split second decision.

Half way there a blackheads landed in front of him. Its body turned to him and he fired blindly, cutting it down. Two more replaced it, but he didn't stop. His first burst cut one down, but the other came rushing forwards. Instinctively he raised his rifle and the

blackheads' sword cut it in two, but it missed him. Gigolo swung out with the butt and smashed it in the face.

The path to the elevator was clear, and he jumped into it without hesitation, slamming the button to go up. The elevator began to rise, and in moments he was out of danger.

'Shit,' he said quietly. The defenses were in chaos- blackheads ran riot around the remaining Spartans, cutting them down. A handful of Spartans had made it to the upper levels and were holding out alright; Gigolo saw reinforcements starting to arrive, but they made no attempt to retake the lower areas. Everyone down there was dead or dying.

Gigolo realized then that Aspertias was dead.

11

Night was falling over Nasces, and Zero was growing tired. His mission had been entirely unsuccessful; nobody was taking the threat seriously. The clans he talked to were either not bothered with something which didn't directly threaten them or assumed that the northern clans would be able to hold the OCP back. Many had laughed him off, calling him a worrywart or accusing him of attempting to raise panic for his own aims. Several had even tried to attack him.

'Black Runners, this is Zero,' he spoke into his radio. 'Returning to base.' A simple acknowledgment played back at him. Zero pulled on the controls and turned his sparrowhawk around, aiming for the Black Runners temporary base.

His radar pinged as it registered another contact. Zero glanced at it disinterestedly- air traffic was common in Nasces- and then did a double take. The contact was a banshee. Banshees, and other exotic equipment, was rare in the north. Zero knew many distrusted the technology. He simply thought it too expensive.

The banshee was on an intercept course for him. His hand hovered over the button that would raise communications. Should he?

The choice was taken from him as the banshee hailed him. A familiar voice played.

'Goodbye, Zero,' Haru said.

A plasma bolt streaked from the banshee's guns. In panic, Zero pulled the Sparrowhawk around, but couldn't move fast enough. The shot smashed into the side of his aircraft, wrecking one of the engines and sending it into a spin.

Zero fought with the aircraft, desperately trying to stabilize it before he crashed. He finally pulled out of the dive barely 20 meters above a tower block. He took in his surroundings quickly, and was dismayed to see the banshee coming around for another attack.

The banshee fired. Zero switched on the targeting systems and fired the nose mounted laser. The laser struck first. The banshee was gutted, one of its wings flying off. It spiraled away, crashing into the side of a nearby building. That was all he saw before the bolt

struck his sparrowhawk, blowing out the last engine. The aircraft dropped like a stone, smashing into the roof of the tower block. Zero was thrown from the cockpit, landing a few meters from the edge of the roof.

'Oh, you piece of-' Zero bit off the curse. It wouldn't help him. The sparrowhawk was beyond repair now, and its radio was gone with it. His own radio might be able to reach the Black Runners, but he didn't want to count on it. There wasn't any other easy solution to his predicament, either. A lone spartan in unfamiliar markings would certainly be fired upon in the city. He was trapped until rescue came.

There was a thud on the roof behind him. Zero spun to see a fist fly into his face. He staggered back, and another blow hit him in the crotch.

'You're going to pay for that,' Haru said. She lifted Zero and threw him against the sparrowhawk. Zero picked himself up as Haru charged towards him again. He ducked her punch and struck back, hitting her in the chest. He followed up with a second punch, giving him time to roll away, around the burning wreckage.

'Why couldn't you just leave me alone?' Zero shouted, searching for a weapon to use.

'You took everything I had!' Haru shouted back. 'If you had just died back when I sabotaged your pelican, none of this would have happened!' She followed him around the wreck. Zero could see the glint of a knife in her hand.

'That was you?' Zero asked, stunned for a moment. Haru took advantage of his confusion to lunge at him, swiping the knife across his body. Zero jumped back, but lost his footing and fell to the floor. Snarling, Haru stabbed at him, but he managed to catch her arm and held it there, the knife inches from his face.

'Of course it was me!' she replied. 'But you survived, so I planted footage of you going into my room with Atlas.' She wrenched her arm free and made to stab again; Zero took the chance to roll away and get to his feet. He back stepped away from her as she howled in frustration.

'You did that!' Zero shouted. 'Why?' He continued to back around the rooftop; a glance behind him showed he was dangerously close to the edge.

'It seemed like an easy way to get rid of you,' Haru said. 'But then Meier went and attacked us before we were ready, and you ended up escaping anyway.'

'That was hardly my fault,' Zero replied.

'So? If not your fault, it was your bitch, Vivian.' Haru lunged again. Zero dodged to his left, but Haru changed her angle and caught him with the knife. It depleted his shields and the force of the blow sent him sprawling. He was now, he realized, back where he had begun.

Next to his head was his rifle. He grabbed it and opened fire on

Haru, who jumped away, shields flaring. Zero got to his feet and continued to fire. Then he heard the click as his ammo ran out.

Haru took the opportunity to rush him, grabbing his waist and throwing him to the floor. She stamped on his right hand and he dropped the gun. Haru kicked it off the edge and tried to attack him, but he swung his legs around, sweeping her feet out from under her. She fell and he sprang onto her, seizing the knife. They grappled for it for a few moments before Zero elbowed Haru in the face and she let go. Now he was on the offensive, forcing Haru back.

'You know what? I am sick and tired of people blaming me for everything that goes wrong for them!' Zero shouted. 'Gigolo, Atlas, you- why do people always blame me! What have I ever done?'

He jumped at Haru, swinging the knife at her throat. She blocked his arm and pushed him back, but not before he managed to cut her. Blood welled up from the wound on her arm and she cried out.

'What did you do? You ruined everything!' Haru yelled, her voice thick.

'No, you did!' Zero shouted back. 'You just can't take the blame for it. It's the same with everyone else.' Haru stepped backwards, watching him warily. He advanced cautiously, watching his footing.

'You know what's funny though?' Zero asked suddenly. 'You blame me for ruining your life, but in reality you ruined my life. I had it good, with Vivian and a nice place, and then you sucked me in with your talk of a better world, and it ruined me.' He kept moving forwards. 'And now you went and destroyed what was left of my life. I'm on the run from my clan, my girlfriend hates me and people I used to trust want me dead.'

Haru was silent. Zero waited to see if she would say anything, but she just kept backing off.

'You wont even deny it,' he continued. 'You know what? I'm going to kill you. I'm going to enjoy it. And then when you respawn at Aspertias, assuming you ever do, you're going to be taken away and executed.' He grinned.

All of a sudden Haru leaned to one side, towards the sparrowhawk. She pulled a chunk of metal out and with a single motion threw it. The spear like rod of metal took Zero in the chest, destroying his shields and sending him flying back. Haru charged at him and pulled him to his feet, before throwing him against the wreckage. Zero slumped, stunned, and she pulled him up again and punched him in the face, and then again. She stepped back and he fell to the floor, unable to defend himself.

'No. I'm going to kill you, and enjoy it,' Haru said, a malicious joy in her voice. She pulled out a second knife and advanced on him.

Time slowed for Zero. The shape of Haru loomed in his vision.

Then a miracle happened. Haru staggered forwards, her shields flaring up. Zero looked up and saw a Sparrowhawk fly into his view, with a

familiar Spartan leaning out of the side, a sniper rifle in her hand.

'Zero! Get up!' Elesa shouted, and Zero's heart lifted.

Haru turned and saw the Sparrowhawk. With a roar, she flung herself to the side as a second sniper shot pierced the area she had been occupying. Haru rolled to the edge of the building, and stood.

'Don't think you've won, Zero!' she shouted, and then jumped off the edge. Elesa cursed, and fired, but it was too late.

Zero had gotten to his feet by the time the Sparrowhawk landed in front of him. The cockpit opened and Vivian got out. Zero smiled; somehow, he knew it couldn't have been anyone else.

'Are you okay?' Vivian asked, concernedly.

'Just about,' Zero replied. 'Hey-'

His words were cut off as Vivian slapped him, hard. It was too much; he collapsed again.

'You idiot! What do you think you're doing?' She yelled, helping him to his feet. 'Why did you run?'

Zero couldn't speak; he was still trying to get his eyes to refocus. Through his blurry vision, he noticed something amiss about Vivian's armor.

'Vivian-' he tried to say, and Vivian yelled harder.

'Don't 'Vivian' me, Zero! I want an explanation, not an excuse!'

'No, Vivian- your armor!' he said.

'Huh?' Vivian said, surprised. 'What about it?'

'The markings- they're gone!'

13. The Destroyers of Worlds (1)

Destroyers of Worlds

'No... no, there must be a mistake,' Vivian said, starting to panic. 'This can't have happened. It can't!'

Zero couldn't find words to comfort her. He supposed he should be feeling some sort of shock himself, but there was none. Perhaps it was because Aspertias hadn't really been his home for nearly 20 years.

'Is this...' Zero hadn't heard Elesa approach. She stood slightly tilted, as though dizzy. 'Is Aspertias gone?'

'No!' Vivian shouted. 'No, no, it can't be!' She shook her head emphatically. 'Meier would never let the clan fall! He

wouldn't!'

'Vivian...' Zero started. 'Vivian, listen to me.' He took hold of her shoulders. 'Aspertias is gone. Our markings are gone. That can only mean that the core has been taken.'

'No!' Vivian screamed. She pushed him away forcefully. 'I won't let this happen!'

'It's beyond anyone's control now,' Zero said quietly. 'There's nothing we can do.'

'Gigolo,' Elesa said suddenly. 'He's dead, isn't he.'

Zero looked at her, confused. She had just lost her home, and quite possibly her closest friend, and she was worrying about somebody she hated?

'He's dead,' Vivian said. 'Him and Midori, and Tomalon and Faris, and Meier, they're all dead. It's just us.' She started to cry, at first slowly but then letting it all out in a flood of tears. Zero took her by the shoulders again.

'Vivian,' He said firmly. 'Listen to me. There's a good chance that they escaped. They could be coming here right now, to help us. But you can't worry about them anymore.'

'No, you don't understand,' Vivian gasped, in between sobs. 'Meier, he said he would never let anyone retreat. He said he'd fight to the end. They're all dead, Zero.'

That sounded like something Meier would do, Zero realized, feeling a coldness settle over his shoulders. It was a good thing he had managed to get away in time then. Immediately he mentally smacked himself for being so selfish. Now was not the time.

'You don't know that for sure,' Zero said. The words rang hollow. 'But if we stay here we'll die for sure. Don't waste your life.'

'Like you wasted yours?' Vivian said suddenly. Zero let go of her and took a step back. He swallowed.

'It's not wasted yet, not while we're still alive,' he replied. That had stung, hearing her say that. It had still hurt, despite all the other things they had said to each other. 'We need to look forward. There's still hope.'

With a last faint sob Vivian collapsed. Zero dragged her back to the sparrowhawk by himself, since Elesa didn't seem able to do much more than stand, and strapped her securely in the back.

As he lifted off and headed towards the Black Runners outpost, he realized that the bitter taste in his mouth came not from being beaten up repeatedly, but from telling so many lies in such a short space of time.

'No.' Meier gasped, staring at the flashing alarm. 'We should have had more time. The defenses aren't ready yet!'

Tomalon stared at him, surprised at how stupid Meier was acting. 'Whose fault is that? Who refused to let scouts go for fear they would desert us?'

'I had no choice!' Meier shouted, suddenly turning on Tomalon. 'You saw how Vivian betrayed me. If even she would leave us, what chance would there be of anybody else being more loyal?' He clenched his fists. Tomalon stood for a moment, waiting to see if Meier would continue. He said nothing more, simply staring at the tactical display of Aspertias.

'Well? Aren't you going to give orders?' Tomalon asked.

'I had counted on having Vivian here,' Meier said quietly. 'She was my good luck charm.'

'So? Unless you start fixing things this clan is going to fall!'

Meier shook his head. 'It will regardless of what I do,' he said.

'You can't believe that,' Tomalon said angrily. 'Come on Meier, do what you're good at!'

Meier sighed, and then slowly leaned over the tactical display. He moved a few icons around, and then spoke.

'All squad leaders report in. We're going to organize defenses around the core. The blackheads are going to have to climb some distance to get to it, so we have to make that as painful for them as possible.' Meier highlighted some areas on the map. 'I'm sending you the stairwells we're going to fortify; destroy the others.'

'A good plan,' Tomalon said. 'What about evacuation?'

'There will be none,' Meier replied coldly. Tomalon gave a start.

'You can't do that,' he said. 'You'd be sentencing everyone to death if you fail.'

'Nobody leaves,' Meier said firmly. 'We either win or we die; there will be no middle ground.'

Tomalon stared at him for a moment, not sure of what to say.

'There will be nothing I can say to change your mind,' he said finally. Meier nodded. 'Then die if you want, but don't expect me to die with you.' Tomalon turned and walked out of the ops center, ignoring Meier's calls for him to return. I used to think that duty was more important than life, he thought. Now I know otherwise, I need to find the spartan who taught me so.

Midori sat bolt upright, startled out of sleep. A persistent whining noise echoed around her room, while a red light flashed in the corner. It was the alarm that signified an attack on the base, and there was only one enemy who could be doing that right now.

She stumbled out of bed and staggered over to her wardrobe. Groggily she dressed in her fatigues and tried to find some food. The alarm's constant whining irritated her, and stopped her from thinking straight. She threw a cup at the speaker and it fell silent, though the red light remained. As her headache subsided, she found her armor and pulled it on quickly.

She had been through too much to believe that Aspertias as it stood had any chance of surviving the OCP's attack. Her own chances of survival hinged on finding a transport out of the base. But she wouldn't leave just yet. There was something she had to do first. Somebody she had to see.

Vivian had been right. Midori had to find Atlas before she left for good. She would never forgive herself if she didn't talk to him once more before she ran or died.

A determined expression on her hard face, Midori left her apartment for the last time and set out into the chaos.

3

The upper plaza was in chaos. Spartans milled around in confusion. Nobody seemed to know what was happening; all that anyone could say was that they were under attack by blackheads. The stripes on Tomalon's armor marked him out as an officer, so he found himself being pestered by troops wanting to know what was going on.

'The blackheads have attacked the bottom of the base,' he said. 'If you want to fight, go down there. Be careful; some areas have already been lost.'

The crowd spread the information like a ripple, and slowly they started to move towards the stairways. Tomalon felt slightly guilty about sending them to what could well be their deaths. It wouldn't be his fault, surely? They wanted to fight, after all.

A group of Spartans stood out from the crowd in their red armor, a contrast to the predominantly white and gold armor of Aspertias. With a satisfied smile, Tomalon made his way to them.

'Commander!' cried the first one to see him. The others turned to him, delight on their faces.

'We'd thought you were dead,' one said. 'How did you get out of Vermillion?'

'I was lucky,' Tomalon said. 'Now, what are your orders?'

The spartan shrugged. 'None. We've been ignored for the most part,' he said. He looked back at his fellow Spartans. 'I don't know about the rest, but I'm happy to follow you from here, sir.' The rest of the Spartans nodded their assent.

'And I'm happy to have you,' Tomalon replied, a smile on his face.

'Vermillion has always fought harder than these Aspertians.' That brought a round of half cheers.

'What are your orders, sir?'

'I'm not dying for nothing here,' Tomalon said. The assembled Spartans muttered at that. 'There are more worthy things worth dying for,' he added. 'Save your lives for when you might need them.' There were a few nods; no doubt the Vermillion Spartans weren't too keen on giving their lives for another clan. 'Can any of you fly a pelican?' There was a lot of head shaking. Nobody could.

'Hey!' came a shout. 'Sir!'

Tomalon turned abruptly, startled at the interruption. He saw a familiar spartan bearing down on him, one he couldn't quite place. Suddenly he remembered; she had been with Vivian at the fall of Vermillion. What was her name?

'Mi... Midori?' He asked. What was she doing here?

'Sir-' Midori cut off. 'Hey, you're the spartan we rescued from Vermillion.' She paused. 'Uh... Tomalon, right?'

'That's my name,' Tomalon said. 'Don't you have something to be doing, soldier? Are you going to let your clan die while you do nothing?'

Midori looked taken aback, and then smiled. 'I wasn't planning on it, no. But then neither were you.' She pushed on, ignoring his half uttered protest. 'Anyway, I was wondering if you'd seen somebody. A male Spartan, about this tall, wearing white and blue armor. Answers to the name Atlas. If it helps,' she said, 'he was the pilot on the return journey from Vermillion.'

Tomalon suddenly swallowed his rebuttal. 'Pilot?' he asked cautiously. 'We could use a pilot.' He coughed. 'For reconnaissance.'

Midori's smile disappeared 'Sure, sure. I won't insult you by saying it straight out, but I know what you're about. Anyway. I need to find Atlas, you need a pilot. What do you say we work together?'

Tomalon frowned. 'Why would we do that? We can pick any pilot, one that isn't missing somewhere.'

'Because,' Midori replied, 'If you do that I'm going to shout very loudly that this group of Vermillion is planning on running with their tails between their legs.'

Tomalon ground his teeth. It insulted him that this grunt of a girl was trying to blackmail him, but there seemed to be no easy way out. He could imagine what would happen if she whipped the crowd up.

'Fine,' he spat. 'Where is your pilot?'

'Atlas,' Midori corrected him. 'And I don't know. Why do you think I was asking you?'

Tomalon clenched his fists in frustration. 'What use is that?' He was regretting talking to the girl now.

'Well, he'll probably be with Gigolo. I'll call him.' Midori looked to the side for a few moments, then shook her head. 'No response.'

Tomalon held his frustration in check. 'Do you know where Gigolo might be, then?'

Midori thought for a moment. 'Actually, I do. He was working on the defenses at the bottom of the base when the blackheads attacked.'

Tomalon frowned. 'But that means he could be...'

Midori shook her head. 'You underestimate Gigolo. We've fought blackheads before, and he's come out fine from both of those. I'm sure he's clinging on somewhere.'

4

The shotgun clicked empty. With a curse, Gigolo threw it at the onrushing blackhead. The weapon took it in the face and toppled it over. With no other weapon around, Gigolo simply pulled the sword from its hand and stabbed the black spartan with it.

'How'd you like that?' he shouted, kicking the corpse away. It slid down the stairs, tripping a few other blackheads.

'Gigolo, get back,' an officer shouted. Holding the sword protectively in front of him, Gigolo pulled out of the stairwell. When he was out of immediate danger he holstered it on his hip without thinking, and walked to the resupply stands set up a few meters away.

'You gonna keep that?' a spartan asked, gesturing to the sword. Gigolo put his hand to it, surprised to see it there.

'Automatic response,' he replied. Still, he left it where it was. Who knew, it could come in handy some day.

Gigolo grabbed another shotgun and some ammunition from the weapon racks, noting with some dismay that the stocks were starting to run out. The situation as it stood, with the blackheads pinned in several stairwells, was remarkably stable, and required only a small amount of manpower to maintain. Still, attrition meant that they couldn't hold it forever. Gigolo also held doubts about the officer's assurances that the blackheads wouldn't look for alternative routes around. Sure, they seemed like they just ran for the nearest spartan, but who was to say that they definitely didn't have the intelligence to do otherwise? It seemed like a pointless risk to Gigolo.

He holstered his shotgun and made his way to the refreshment stands. A pretty spartan stood sipping a drink. Gigolo sidled up next to her, and took a glass of water.

'Pretty nasty, isn't it?' he said. The spartan turned to look at him, her eyebrows raised.

'I have a boyfriend, you know,' she said.

'So do I!' Gigolo replied quickly. The Spartans eyes remained raised. 'A girlfriend. Not a boyfriend,' he added, seeing her expression. She put her cup down and walked away. 'Hey, I was just trying to be nice!' he called after her.

Sighing, Gigolo sat on the floor. It seemed as though his luck with ladies had run dry. Elesa was perpetually cool, his other attempts met with polite refusal, or worse, laughter.

Wait. Did I just call Elesa my girlfriend? It had felt good, saying that. Why Elesa, of all the women in the world? Why someone who hated him? Still, she was young, and hot. And quite nice, when she forgot she hated him. There were worse people he could be infatuated with. Midori, for one. She'd been acting very cool towards him lately, since Atlas had started acting funny. They were probably connected somehow.

His break was nearly over. Gigolo stood up and drained the glass, putting it back on the table. He stretched, and then ambled back to the huddle of Spartans.

There was a strange glow in the ceiling. Was that odd?

Gigolo tapped the officer on the shoulder and told him that he was ready. The officer nodded and pointed towards the stairwell.

Halfway there Gigolo turned. He wasn't sure why. Something to do with the glow on the ceiling.

Out of the blue a sword stabbed through the ceiling panels and cut a circle. The ceiling fell through, depositing 3 blackheads into the center of the huddle. The blackheads lashed out as they fell, slicing through the group. In a second the Spartans were all dead.

Gigolo reached for his assault rifle by instinct, but found himself grasping the energy sword. There was no time to swap- he raised it in time to block a swipe from a blackhead, and then pushed forwards and slashed it in two.

Shouts came, and bullets started flying, killing the other two blackheads. More fell from the ceiling, charging at the defenders.

Oh shit oh shit oh shit - Gigolo parried a swipe and started running backwards towards the stairwell. He stumbled back into it, blocking repeated attacks with his sword.

The Spartans in the stairwell turned to see what the fuss was, and stared, shocked, at Gigolo fending off the blackheads. The moment of shock was all the blackheads below them needed. They rushed forwards, overwhelming the defenders. Gigolo was surrounded.

In that moment Gigolo knew he was going to die. He wasn't going to respawn; he wasn't going to get his 400 years of life, as he deserved. No! I won't let this happen!

Panic rose, but so did another feeling- an animalistic will to survive, from deep within his soul.

Then there was a moment of silence, broken only by a short, sharp sound- not unlike a pane of glass being shattered.

The blackheads all stopped suddenly, and in some expanded part of his mind Gigolo could feel them. He knew somehow that if he desired something of them they would obey. The feeling was unlike anything he had ever encountered. The shock of it caused him to fall to his feet, and for a moment he forgot his desire to survive.

As quickly as it had come, the feeling subsided, and the blackheads were hostile to him again. Gigolo, lying prone without his weapons, could do nothing.

Then the second miracle happened.

The stairwell convulsed suddenly, throwing the blackheads to the ground. It shuddered again, and then the collapsed. Gigolo was thrown into the air.

He landed heavily on a pile of rubble. Smaller rocks hit his chest, blowing his shields.

'What the hell?' Gigolo shook his head, manually restarting his shields. He stood up and took a look around. He was in some kind of maintenance area, with red lit corridors running off on either side. The rubble seemed to have settled, so far as he could see, but there was still some rumbling far off. Was the base collapsing?

There was nothing else moving. Gigolo searched around for his sword and holstered it. Fortunately his shotgun was still on his back, although it was now quite damaged from his weight.

'Hello?' Gigolo called. Nobody replied. With a shrug he picked a direction- his left- and set off down it, his shotgun drawn.

After several hundred meters the tunnel emerged into another maintenance area. Gigolo thumbed the light switch, but nothing happened. He raised his shotgun and turned the flashlight on, illuminating the area. To his surprise, a spartan stood off to one side.

The spartan jumped when the light fell on him. He spun round and raised his weapon at Gigolo.

'Gigolo?' he said incredulously.

'Atlas?' Gigolo replied, surprised again. 'What are you doing down here?'

'I could ask the same of you,' Atlas said, not lowering his gun. 'How did you find me?'

'Random chance,' Gigolo said. 'It's not like I was looking for you or anything. Could you put the gun down, please?' Reluctantly Atlas lowered his gun. 'There was some collapse a short while ago. I fell down here.'

'Who sent you? Was it Midori?' Atlas asked insistently.

'Hey, nobody sent me. I told you, it was pure luck.' Atlas looked unconvinced. Gigolo looked around for something else to say. 'What is this place anyway?'

'I don't know,' Atlas replied. 'But you're the first person I've seen down here.' He turned away from Gigolo, staring at the walls of the expansive room. 'This whole tunnel system... why haven't we heard about it before?'

'I dunno... Say, aren't you worried about blackheads down here?'

'Why would I be?' Atlas asked, sounding genuinely confused.

'Because they- oh, hell.' Gigolo sighed. 'How far does it go on for?'

'It's a loop, about 4 kilometers in diameter. As far as I can tell, we're in the mountain the base is built on.'

'So how do we get out?' Gigolo asked.

'I got in through an old maintenance shaft from the residential areas' Atlas gestured further down the tunnel. 'I'll show you.' With that he started jogging away, down the tunnel he had indicated. With nothing better to do, Gigolo started following him. He just hoped his friend hadn't gone completely crazy. He hoped he hadn't gone completely crazy.

14. The Destroyers of Worlds (2)

The tunnels seemed to go on forever, curving slowly leftward. There were curious markings on some of the walls as well as faded writing in some places which seemed mainly to announce that the area was not safe for non certified personnel. Whatever the tunnels had been once used for, they were now totally empty, save for Gigolo and his possibly insane companion.

'Not far now,' Atlas said suddenly. Gigolo grunted acknowledgment.

Atlas stopped suddenly, causing Gigolo to bump into his back. He turned, regarding Gigolo with a piercing stare.

'Are you sure you want to leave?' he asked.

'Uh... yeah?' Gigolo replied, confused. 'I have to help somehow.'

'Help? Help what?' Atlas asked.

'The-' Gigolo paused, and looked sideways at Atlas. 'You do know the base is under attack from Blackheads, right?'

'Huh?' Atlas looked at Gigolo, confused. 'Well, I knew they were in the base,' he said. 'I suppose they would be attacking people, then.'

Gigolo shook his head despairingly. 'What's wrong with you? This

isn't like you.'

'Things changed,' Atlas said. 'I changed.'

No matter how Gigolo pushed him, he would say no more on the topic.

Eventually they reached a doorway cut into the outside of the tunnel. Atlas led Gigolo through it and up a flight of stairs, depositing him in a hallway near the motor pool. It wasn't an area Gigolo knew very well, but fortunately his network access had just returned. He hadn't noticed it go.

He pulled up a map of the area in his HUD, and noticed that a call from Midori was waiting. He accepted it.

'Gigolo! I've been trying to get through for ages!' Midori said as soon as he picked up. 'Where have you been?'

'It's a long story,' Gigolo replied hurriedly. There were no blackheads around, but that didn't mean he was safe. 'What did you want?'

'Have you seen Atlas recently?' Midori asked.

'Atlas? Yeah, he's here with me.'

'Are you talking to Midori?' Atlas asked. Gigolo nodded, distracted. Atlas suddenly punched him, hard. Gigolo doubled up, and Atlas hit him again, flooring him.

'The fuck-' Gigolo shouted, coughing. 'What the hell was that for?'

'You told me you weren't working with Midori,' Atlas said, too softly. 'I can't believe you'd sell me out to that bitch.' He lifted his foot and brought it down on Gigolo's head.

5

The connection cut suddenly. 'Gigolo? Gigolo?' Midori asked, worried. 'He's gone.' She looked helplessly at Tomalon, who shrugged.

'I think it's a surprise he was alive in the first place,' he said. 'Still, he did say he was with Atlas. Did you get a fix on his position?'

Midori shook her head. 'Not in the time I had.'

'So we're no closer to finding your pilot,' Tomalon said, sighing.

'At least I had a pilot in the first place,' Midori replied. Tomalon sighed again.

'Look, we're not going to find him at this rate,' Tomalon said. 'Why don't you come with us? We'll find a pilot and get out of here.'

Midori shook her head. 'I'm not leaving without Atlas,' she said

firmly. 'Even if that means I don't leave at all.'

'But we'll die for sure if we wait much longer,' Tomalon said insistently. 'Surely you can see that.'

'I don't care,' Midori replied. 'This is more important to me than living.'

Tomalon looked at her despairingly, and then shook his head. 'So be it.'

'Huh?' Midori asked, surprised. 'You're just going to accept it?'

'I don't see what choice I have,' Tomalon replied. 'Besides, I've felt the way you do before.'

Midori caught his gaze and held it for a moment. She nodded finally.

'We'll go to Atlas's apartment,' she said. 'There's bound to be something there to lead us to him.'

'Got it,' Tomalon replied. 'You lead the way.'

From where they were it was a short walk, mostly downwards, to the apartment area where Atlas lived. They passes occasional patrols, or Spartans running from place to place. Nobody questioned them; a look at Tomalon's rank was enough to dispel any doubts. The lower they got, the more Spartans there were running around, and sounds of battle could be heard. They were getting dangerously close to the front lines.

Midori led the group almost to the bottom of Aspertias held territory and then back up a bit, into the apartment area, to Atlas's door.

Midori hesitated in front of the door. She knocked slowly. There was no response.

'He's probably not in,' she said, breathing out.

'So?' Tomalon asked. He motioned to one of his troops, who took an axe from his belt and in a few swings brought the door down. Midori winced; if he had been in, that wasn't the way she would have liked to arrive.

The room was a mess. Half eaten food was scattered everywhere, and discarded litter covered the floor. The bed was dirty and unmade. A laptop lay on it, turned off.

'Smells like something died in here,' Tomalon said disdainfully, picking through some discarded clothing.

'Maybe something did,' Midori said, walking to the bed. She tried the laptop, but it was out of charge. Bits of paper lay on the mattress; they seemed to be printouts of old news reports. A very off thing for him to be reading.

'Midori,' Tomalon called abruptly. 'You'll want to see this.'

Midori turned from the bed and walked to where Tomalon was standing. He held a stack of papers in his hands, with some drawings on them. He wordlessly gave them to her.

Midori gasped at the first. It was a drawing of her, standing on a rooftop, her hair freely blowing in the wind. The date pencilled in was the day she'd broken up with Atlas.

Atlas had always been a good artist, but this sketch was as good as anything she'd ever seen. It must have taken ages for him to complete. She took the rest of the papers from Tomalon. Why had he given her them?

The next drawing was like a physical blow to her chest. It showed Atlas weeping in a ball, curled up before a demoniacally rendered Midori. Her skin was red, her teeth long and yellow. Fire burned in her eyes, showing pure hatred for Atlas.

I never felt that way about him! How could he have drawn this? All she had done was ask him to get his priorities straight- how had he come to hate her so?

The rest of the drawings followed in a similar fashion, though they became much less impassioned towards the end. They showed a side of Atlas Midori had never known- a man burning with hatred.

Could I have done this?

'It wasn't your fault,' Tomalon said. Midori looked up at him sharply. What did he know? 'I guessed from the look on your face,' he continued.

'I drove him over the edge,' Midori said. As she admitted it to herself, tears formed in the corner of her eyes.

'That may be,' Tomalon said. 'But you couldn't have known how he would take it.' He took her by the shoulder. 'Listen to me. You have to set this right.'

'Why do you care?' Midori asked bitterly.

'Like I said, I've been through this myself,' Tomalon replied. 'And I'd quite like to get out of here,' he muttered. Midori smiled at that.

'Boss! Blackheads!' One of the Vermillion troops started firing. Cursing, Tomalon let go of her shoulder and ran to the door of the apartment, drawing his Light Rifle. The firing continued for a few moments, and then abruptly ended.

'I've never seen them do that before,' Tomalon said slowly, holstering his weapon.

'Are they all dead?' Midori asked.

'No. Well, they're gone,' Tomalon added, seeing Midori's expression. 'But they just stopped, mid run. Then they turned and left.'

'Huh? They do that?'

'Not so far as I've seen,' Tomalon replied. 'This is new to me, at least. And worrying.'

6

'Son of a-' Gigolo opened his eyes with a groan. He blinked a few times, and then got to his feet. His head ached, and he was bruised all over, but at least he was alive.

Wait...

He was alive? How? He'd been kicked unconscious by his friend- former friend- and left for the blackheads. How was he not dead yet?

Gigolo pulled his shotgun from its holster- at least both his weapons were still there- and scanned the corridor he was in. There was no sign of movement either way. From the signs on the walls, he was still where he'd been knocked out. Shrugging, Gigolo started walking the way he'd been going before.

His path took him upwards, from the maintenance sections at the bottom of the base into the training areas and storage hangars. Gigolo saw little sign of life anywhere. Occasional sounds drifted from above. Gunfire, explosions, screams. Screams weren't something you heard on a battlefield often, unless some poor Spartan died a particularly nasty death. These weren't those sorts of screams though. These were screams of fear. Screams of the people dying permanently. At least if your arm was blown off you knew it would be back when you respawned.

Gigolo tried his radio. It was dead; the kick from Atlas had taken it out, as well as cracking the corner of his faceplate. I'm going to kill him when I see him.

Gigolo turned a corner and froze. A blackhead stood down the hallway, about 20 meters ahead, staring straight at him. Heart pounding, Gigolo reached for his shotgun. It was useless at short range- he'd have to wait for the blackhead to get closer. But the blackhead didn't make any movement towards him.

Was it a trap? Gigolo checked behind him- no blackheads rushing to take the lone Spartan unawares. Not that they'd normally be clever enough to do so, but recently they'd surprised Gigolo more than once.

The blackhead still hadn't moved. Gigolo started to edge forward, checking behind him frequently. As he got closer, the blackhead gave a start, and raised its sword arm. In a jerky motion, it beckoned him onwards, and then started to walk away from him, down the hallway.

'What the actual fuck?' Gigolo said aloud. He started to move forwards, following the blackhead. A sound from behind made him turn around, and once more he froze. 4 more blackheads stood behind him, blocking the route backwards. Like the other blackhead, they didn't move to attack him.

Gigolo took a step back. They took a step forward. Gigolo stood still. So did they.

Gigolo took a tentative step forwards, and then jumped back again as they raised their swords. As soon as he was back to his original position, they lowered them again.

'This is crazy.' Gigolo shook his head. Was he actually dead? That would explain the lack of a radio. Or maybe not. Did the dead have radios? Whatever the case, blackheads simply didn't act like this. Surely that meant something was controlling them, then. But who?

Gigolo thought back to his fight in the stairwell. For a moment, he'd felt like he could control the blackheads directly if he so wished. Had someone else found the same trick?

For that matter, how had he done it the first time? He'd been stressed, and angry, and something had just broken inside his mind.

He looked at the line of blackheads in front of him. They'd taken another step forward and raised their swords again. The message was clear: there were better times to be thinking about how to control them.

Gigolo turned and started walking after the lone blackhead, which had paused some way in front of him. When it saw him following, it continued onwards, matching his pace. The blackheads behind continued onwards as well, giving him no other way to go.

Why does it feel like I'm being herded?

There was no reason for the blackheads to herd him anywhere that he could think of. They would just kill him there and then if they wanted him dead, which was more or less the only thing anybody knew that they wanted. So that left some other person controlling the blackheads. Were they trying to lead him to safety? It seemed a bit of a stretch.

There was a sound from up ahead, and another handful of blackheads dropped from the ceiling. They turned to face Gigolo, swords raised, and charged.

In a flash the blackheads behind Gigolo ran forwards as well, past him in an instant. The lead blackhead ran forward as well. The hostile blackheads ignored it, focused solely on Gigolo. It was a mistake- the lead blackhead dropped and swung it's sword, cutting down the leaders. The rest immediately turned and killed it, but by that point few enough of them were left that the remainder of Gigolo's escort could finish them off. Gigolo watched in amazement. Never had he seen blackheads fight each other- heck, he'd never seen one hurt another, even by accident. Not that he'd seen many, or wanted to.

The two remaining blackheads stared at Gigolo for a moment, and then gestured hurriedly, the same mechanism as before. This time Gigolo followed without reservation, running after the pair.

Soon Gigolo saw signs for places he recognized, and then he was in an area he knew- the apartment area where Atlas lived. The two blackheads kept running, and Gigolo knew where they were taking him.

Gunfire sounded up ahead, and the Blackheads stopped. They paused for a moment, and then turned and ran back the way they had came.

'Am I supposed to follow you?' he shouted after them. They ignored him, sprinting away.

'Gigolo!' a familiar voice cried. Gigolo span around to see Midori and someone familiar jogging towards him.

'Midori?' Gigolo asked, surprised.

'How did you get here? You suddenly dropped out of contact, and we couldn't tell where you were!'

Gigolo hesitated, wondering how best to answer. 'I, uh, followed a group of blackheads. I figured they would head for some Spartans sooner or later.'

'And that they wouldn't just kill you straight off?' the familiar person said scornfully.

'Tomalon!' Midori glared at him.

'Well, they obviously didn't,' Gigolo replied with a smile. 'So I guess I was right, eh?'

Tomalon ground his teeth. 'Evidently,' he spat after a moment.

'So where's Atlas? Isn't he with you?' Midori asked, worried.

'Ah,' Gigolo said. 'See-'

'Is he dead?!"

'No! No, he isn't. He left me, after he heard that I was talking to you.'

'Why didn't you follow him?'

'It was a little hard,' Gigolo said wryly, 'Given that he'd kicked me in the face.' He immediately regretted what he'd said, as Midori slumped to the floor.

'All this, and I still don't know where he is.' Amazingly, she started crying. Gigolo watched in disbelief- Midori rarely cried, if ever.

'Where did you see him first?' Tomalon asked suddenly.

'Oh yeah!' Gigolo said, realizing. 'He was in some kind of maintenance tunnel. He said it circled the base.'

'I know what you mean. Vermillion had one as well.' Tomalon looked around. 'If it's the same as in Vermillion, and I suspect it will be, it'll be connected to the ventilation in some places.' He waved at the ceiling. 'I bet we'll find him in there somewhere.'

Midori looked up, hopeful for a moment, but then slumped again. 'Those places are swarming with blackheads,' she said, sniffing. 'I

heard from some of the other Spartans.'

'Atlas said the blackheads didn't bother him,' Gigolo said. 'And they were acting strange earlier-' he bit back more. He couldn't risk them finding out. They'd think him a freak for sure.

Tomalon shared a look with the other Spartans who had walked up. 'We noticed that as well,' he said slowly. 'The ones we were fighting ran off, just as you arrived.' The look he gave Gigolo spoke of words to be had later. Gigolo swallowed. 'But for now, we just have to find Atlas. I'll take the lead from now.'

7

Tomalon led his group of Spartans along the hall until he spotted a likely vent. His troops peppered the ceiling around it with bullets, and then one climbed up into it to check for blackheads. It seemed safe.

'This is a ventilation shaft?' Gigolo asked when inside. 'I thought they were smaller than this.'

The space was tall enough for a Spartan to stand in and wide enough for 3 to stand shoulder to shoulder. It stretched off into the distance both ways.

'Some of them were made to accommodate human maintenance teams,' Tomalon explained. 'The small ones can only fit robots, which would inevitably break down at some stage.'

'And this leads into the tunnels?'

'It should do, if it's the same as in Vermillion.' With a grunt, Gigolo started walking down the vent. Tomalon followed, watching the other Spartan warily. Gigolo was hiding something; of that he was sure. It would be best to keep a close eye on him. The other Spartans walked behind.

'What were the tunnels used for?' Midori asked.

'We never found out,' Tomalon replied. 'It wasn't exactly important to us; just a quirk that showed up in bases between three and two thousand years old. I only knew because it was something to consider in defensive plans, and the only reason we never filled them in was because there was always something more worthwhile to do with the resources.'

'Did you say three thousand?' Midori asked, shocked. 'Is Aspertias really that old?'

'Not nearly,' Tomalon said. 'Records are hazy, but this clan is no more than 800 years old. The base was used by other clans before that.' He turned to look at Midori. 'Did you not know any of this?'

'Well... no,' Midori replied hesitantly. 'It was never something I looked into.'

'And you?' Tomalon asked Gigolo.

'Me neither,' Gigolo replied. 'History isn't something we talk about. Heck, until recently I didn't know that there had been a civil war in Aspertias.'

Tomalon raised his eyebrows. 'How long have you lived here?'

'Ten years or so,' Gigolo said, shrugging. 'I'm not that old.'

'I've spent more time here than you,' Tomalon said with a smile.

After a few minutes Tomalon held up a hand. 'Movement,' he said cautiously. The group drew their weapons. A glow came from deeper in the tunnel, and then a single blackhead appeared, walking slowly towards them.

'Hold fire!' Tomalon ordered. There was muttering from behind, but nobody fired at the blackhead. It stopped a few meters ahead of them, and raised its sword in a defensive posture.

'I think it wants us to leave,' Midori said.

'I've never seen one do that before,' Tomalon said quietly. 'What do you want?' he called to the stationary blackhead. It didn't respond, standing in the same defensive posture.

Midori crossed her arms. 'Like I said.'

'Who commands you?' Gigolo called out. 'I wish to meet with him.'

The blackhead turned its head to look at Gigolo, and then slowly and expressively shook its head.

'That's a no,' Tomalon said. 'What about the first question?'

Again the blackhead shook its head.

'It can't tell us? Or is there nobody commanding it?' Midori asked.

'I think there's somebody controlling it,' Tomalon replied. 'Blackheads don't act this way.'

'There's definitely somebody commanding it,' Gigolo said. 'We need to get to him.'

Midori stared at Gigolo for a moment, and then gasped. 'You don't mean Atlas is controlling them, do you?'

'I don't know,' Tomalon replied. 'Do you mean that, Gigolo?' He smiled sweetly at Gigolo

'It's a possibility,' Gigolo replied, the grinding of his teeth audible through the radio.

Tomalon stared at the Blackhead, which stared back. Eventually he shrugged. 'We don't have time for this,' he said. 'We're going in.'

'Is that wise?' Gigolo asked nervously.

'If by some miracle it is Atlas controlling them then he might just hold back from killing us,' Tomalon said. 'If not, then we're probably dead anyway.'

'Very well, Mr Optimist,' Midori muttered.

Tomalon walked towards the blackhead. It raised its sword into a more threatening position as he approached. Tomalon simply pushed it aside and walked past. The rest of the group followed more carefully. After they had all passed, the blackhead started to walk slowly after them.

The tunnels stretched on, and the group passed more blackheads standing guard. None tried to stop them, simply watching from the shadows. The display unnerved Tomalon. In the tight quarters they would be massacred if the blackheads decided to fight, and it seemed the mysterious controller knew it.

Eventually the group came to a large open space where multiple shafts met. Great machinery churned on the walls, oblivious to the fight going on in the base. It was a eerie thought, that even as the inhabitants of the base fought and died, the air conditioning worked on.

Atlas stood at the far end, surrounded by blackheads. He raised his head as they walked in.

'Leave now,' he shouted, his voice strangely amplified. 'I don't want you here.'

Tomalon made to speak, by Gigolo quietened him.

'We came to help you,' he called out. 'Escape with us.'

'You don't want to help me!' Atlas shouted back. 'You just need me to fly you out of here!'

'Can we rewind that part?' Tomalon whispered to Gigolo, who waved him away irritably.

'The blackheads will kill you!' Gigolo shouted. 'I'd rather that didn't happen.'

'You have no idea, do you?' Atlas shouted back. He laughed. 'The blackheads are under my control. Why do you think you survived to meet up with Midori?' His face contorted as he mentioned Midori's name.

'Stop this Atlas!' Midori cried out suddenly. 'I'm sorry for everything- just come back with us!'

'Shut up!' Atlas shouted. 'I don't want to see you! I don't want you here!'

'Bringing her was a bad idea,' Gigolo whispered.

'Thank you, ace detective,' Tomalon replied through gritted teeth. 'Will you take this seriously?'

'I was wrong,' Midori shouted. 'I didn't know how you felt, how it would affect you.'

'You say that now,' Atlas shouted, 'As I stand here with your life in my hands. You're not sincere.'

'Be careful,' Gigolo said quietly. 'Those blackheads are starting to get restless.'

'I am sincere!' Midori cried back. 'I was stupid and blind! I didn't see the pain I put you through.' She pulled out the picture Atlas had made of her. 'This has nothing to do with what Gigolo and Tomalon want. I used them to find you, because I want your forgiveness before I die!' Midori pushed past Gigolo and started walking towards Atlas.

'Don't come any closer!' Atlas screamed. 'I swear I'll kill you!' The blackheads raised their swords threateningly, but Midori pushed past them.

Gigolo grabbed Tomalon and started after Midori. The Vermillion troops followed behind, muttering amongst themselves.

'If saying I was sorry would help I would say it a thousand times,' Midori shouted, pushing through the throng of blackheads. 'But just telling you won't be enough!' She got to the edge of the crowd, just in front of Atlas. He stared at Midori with hatred in his eyes, and then pulled back his leg and kicked her. With a cry Midori fell to the floor, and Atlas kicked her again. He raised his leg once more, but Midori reached up and took it in her hands.

'I know how it hurts,' Midori said quietly. She pulled herself up, leaning against Atlas. 'I don't know how to show you fully.' Midori stared into his hate filled eyes. 'But I think you do. Do it, for me.'

Hesitantly Atlas reached out and touched the base of Midori's neck, and his eyes crossed for a moment.

'Oh,' he said simply, and collapsed. Midori fell on top of him, her support gone.

Tomalon looked at Gigolo. 'What just happened?' he asked, his voice faint. Something important had just happened, and he had no idea what it had been.

' Fucked if I know,' Gigolo replied succinctly.

8

The rest of the fight was refreshingly simple for Gigolo. No crazy acting blackheads, or crazier acting women. No mysterious things going on.

'Guess Atlas was controlling them after all,' Tomalon said. 'They attacked us immediately after he collapsed.' The red clad Spartan sat on one side of the pelican's bay, holding his helmet in his hands. His face was stony.

Midori sat next to Gigolo, staring into her lap. At Tomalon's words she looked up.

'I'm sorry,' she said quietly.

'It was hardly your fault,' Gigolo said, glaring at Tomalon. 'Blame Atlas, or better yet, the blackheads. This is all their fault.'

'I'm sorry too,' Atlas spoke over the radio. 'If it makes any difference.' Tomalon grunted.

Gigolo sat back, reviewing the events in his mind. After Midori had done that thing with Atlas, the blackheads seemed to break free of his control and attacked the Vermillion Spartans, who were standing at the back of their group. They'd bought time for the Aspertians and Tomalon to escape, but at the cost of their own lives. Tomalon seemed to be taking it pretty badly.

'You sure you don't remember any thing?' Gigolo asked over the radio.

'Nothing since a day ago or so,' Atlas replied. 'I do remember the end though. With Midori.'

'Convenient,' Tomalon muttered. Gigolo glared at him again. He had made his views on Atlas very clear; if he hadn't been outnumbered he might well have just shot the other Spartan and taken his chances with the autopilot. The fact that Atlas couldn't remember any of the things he'd done only irritated Tomalon more.

There was silence for a while.

'We'll be out of the blackheads' SOI soon,' Atlas said. 'What do we want to do now?'

'We'll go wherever Vivian and Elesa went,' Gigolo replied.

'Nasces, then,' Midori said.

'Course set,' Atlas said after a moment. 'Straight down the great southern road.'

15. The Destroyers of Worlds (3)

9

The Black Runners had appropriated one of the tallest buildings in eastern Nasces. From the observation gallery, you could see all across the sparkling city into the wilderness beyond, and onwards to the Ghost peninsular, where the Steel Templars had their strongholds. To the south lay the harbor district, serving ships from Solidade and beyond, and even further was the dark mass of the solar straights which separated the northern continent from the rest of the world. The SolNas bridge stood out against the quietly rolling ocean, its white profile silhouetted against the night sky.

There was nowhere in the gallery where Zero could see northwards. It was just as well; the north was where his home was, a home which no longer existed. Everyone he had known there was likely dead for

good.

The thought didn't make him as sad as it should have done, instead simply angry. Angry at the injustice of the situation, angry at the incompetence that led to the situation in the first place. Did nobody in the world have any idea how to tackle the OCP? Even now that the fall of Aspertias paved the way for the blackheads to march on Nasces, the clans of the city did nothing, preferring their eternal warfare. Only the Black Runners seemed interested in trying to defend the great city.

'Dark thoughts on a dark night,' Alcor said suddenly. Zero jumped. He hadn't heard the old builder approach.

'Indeed,' Zero said, not turning. He continued to stare out of the windows. Alcor was silent.

'There is still hope, you know,' Alcor said eventually.

'Not for Aspertias,' Zero replied.

'The world is bigger than just Aspertias.' Alcor moved beside Zero, looking out into the distance. 'It means that your tragedy is swallowed up in the bigger picture, yes, but it also means that there is something to go on despite that.'

'There's still a future, you mean?' Zero asked. Alcor nodded. 'It won't be a good one.'

'What makes you say that?' Alcor asked.

'We're going to lose Nasces,' Zero replied. 'It's inevitable. And when we do, the OCP will have access to hundreds of cores, all making more blackheads. We'll be overwhelmed.'

'Perhaps,' Alcor said. 'But who said we're going to lose Nasces? It hasn't fallen yet.'

'How can we defend it when the very people in the city don't give a damn?'

'The Black Runners give their damn. So to do the Builders.'

'So you'll help us?' Zero asked, suddenly hopeful. The military might of the Builders Alliance was legendary. If they added their strength, perhaps not all was lost.

'I cannot say what the Builders will do,' Alcor replied carefully, 'But I for one will do my all to assist you.'

Zero nodded. It was as good as he was going to get. Suddenly the future didn't seem so bleak.

Time passed. Both Spartans stared out into the darkness, lost in their thoughts. A third Spartan approached.

'Zero?' Samael asked. 'Ah, you're up. I'd like you to come meet someone with me.'

'Who?' Zero asked.

'It's easier to let him explain. Are you coming too?' Samael asked Alcor.

'I'll come,' he replied. With a nod, Sam led the others out of the darkened room and into the base. The trio ended up at the medical center, in the heart of the tower. Samael knocked, and then entered.

Inside, a male spartan was sitting on a bed, eating. He looked up as the trio entered.

'Zero, this is Lucas,' Samael said. 'He's an ex Scorpion, rescued by Vivian and Elesa.' Lucas put his meal down and reached out a hand.

'Pleasure to meet ya,' he said. Zero took his hand and shook limply. A Scorpion? Where were his clan markings? Had the Scorpions fallen as well?

'Since the Scorpions no longer exist, I was going to invite him to join us,' Samael said. 'The invitation is extended to you, and any other survivors of Aspertias.'

'Sure thing,' Lucas said. 'Not like I got anywhere to go back to.'

'Zero?'

Zero nodded slowly. 'Yes. For me, at least. I don't know what Vivian and Elesa will want to do.'

'You from Aspertias?' Lucas asked, looking at Zero.

'Yes,' Zero replied. 'Um.'

'Hey, no hard feelings,' Lucas said, smiling. 'I never understood why we hated you in the first place.'

Zero tried to smile back, and failed. Grimacing, he replied. 'Me neither, for that matter.'

How can he smile when his clan is gone?_ More importantly, how can I learn from him? _

10

Elesa lay in darkness, with only her thoughts for company. The small room she'd been given for a sleeping place had only a bunk bed and a small dresser. The silence was deafening. Elesa had very rarely slept alone; normally she would be able to hear Midori breathing from the other room in her apartment. Vivian's light breathing had been doing the trick, but the other spartan had gotten up and left a while back, leaving Elesa alone, unable to sleep.

I'll never hear Midori breathing again._

Midori and Gigolo were both dead. Gone, forever. How could that happen? What right did anyone have to take away their lives? Why would anyone even want to do that? Taking someone's life was just

wrong.

Elesa rolled over uncomfortably. She'd killed people. To be fair, they'd been attacking her, and she hadn't known that it would kill them permanently. And if they'd killed her she would probably also be dead permanently, since she wouldn't have had a chance to respawn. Did that make it right? Was killing ever justified? She didn't know, but she knew someone who might know.

Alcor opened his door shortly after he knocked, blinking at her. He'd obviously just woken up, but smiled at her all the same.

'Elesa! Come, come in.' He gently pulled Elesa in to his apartment and sat her down on his sofa. 'Drink?' he asked.

'Uh, no thanks,' Elesa replied. 'Did I wake you?'

'No, actually,' Alcor replied. 'I'd just gotten back from talking with Samael, so I didn't have a chance to go to sleep.' He sat down in his armchair, then looked concernedly at Elesa. 'Are you okay? You don't look like you've slept.'

'I've been thinking,' Elesa said, biting her lip. 'About death.'

'Which kind?' Alcor asked.

'The permanent kind,' Elesa replied. Alcor sighed.

'That's a weighty topic,' he said. 'And not one I'm qualified to talk about.'

'I'm sure you know something,' Elesa said, leaning towards him. 'You seem to know about everything else.'

Alcor grimaced. 'Death isn't exactly something I tend to think about. There's no reason to- it's just the end of life. Simple as that.'

'Then what happens after death?'

'There isn't anyone on this planet who can tell you that.'

'Does nobody know?' Elesa frowned. That was disappointing.

'Well...' Alcor sighed. 'There are theories. Just conjecture, nothing more.'

'And? What are they?'

'You're just full of questions, aren't you?' Alcor replied. 'Fine. The most common theory is that when you die, that's it. You're dead, you don't exist anymore. You can't think because you have no brain, and you can't feel because you have no body.'

'That's depressing,' Elesa said. 'Is that what you think?'

'I think I'll find out when I get there,' Alcor replied drily. 'There are other theories. Some say that you go to a paradise after you die, where you get eternal life and pleasure.'

'For free?'

'In most versions it's dependent upon being a good person in life-fighting well, doing good for your clan, and so on.' Alcor snorted. 'The theory isn't very popular. Some clans in Cressat enforce it, but that's about it.'

Elesa thought for a moment. 'I think I'd like it if that were the case,' she said. 'Then dying wouldn't be such an issue. People could be happy.'

'It has its dark sides.' Alcor grimaced. 'The flip-side is that if you aren't a good enough Spartan, then you get eternal punishment instead. The stick to convince those for whom the carrot isn't enough.'

'I can think of some people who deserve that punishment.'

Alcor raised his eyebrows. 'Really? You'd presume to send somebody else to eternal torture? Do you have that right?'

Elesa sighed. 'No, I suppose not. It would be nice if there were some justice in the world, though.'

Alcor shrugged. 'Perhaps there is. Nobody knows for sure.'

Elesa sat and thought. The possibility of life after death had given her hope. Perhaps Gigolo and Midori were still alive somewhere, waiting for her to join them.

'I didn't have you down as the philosophical type,' Alcor said, breaking into her thoughts.

'What's that mean?' Elesa asked.

'Philosophy? It's what we were talking about. The study of things that can't be studied by science.'

'But there's no way to prove any of it.'

'No. Like I said, it's all conjecture.'

'So, people just think about it? Where do they find the time to do that?'

'Like I said, things are different in Cressat. You'll have to come see it sometime.'

There was a knock on the door. With a sigh, Alcor stood and walked to the door. He opened it and Vivian walked in, smiling when she saw Elesa.

'I hope I'm not interrupting something,' she said, 'It's just that I want to show Elesa something.'

'It's no problem at all,' Alcor said, a frown on his face. 'We were just discussing philosophy.'

'Is that one of the things you Builders do while other people are

fighting your wars?' Vivian asked. Alcor's frown deepened. 'Come on Elesa,' Vivian said.

With a glance to Alcor, Elesa followed Vivian out of the apartment.

'That was harsh,' Elesa said after a moment.

'True though,' Vivian replied. 'You'd be wise to keep away from the Builders. They make a habit of manipulating others into fighting for them.'

'Their life sounds nice.'

'I'm sure it is,' Vivian said. 'But it's only possible because of the other clans which protect them.'

Elesa didn't respond. Such a life couldn't possibly be morally sound. But then, life wasn't fair. If it was, Gigolo and Midori would still be alive. Elesa blinked hard. She wasn't going to let herself be swallowed up by despair again.

Elesa followed Vivian through the base. After a short time, they came to the landing pad. Vivian stopped her by the entrance to the hangar.

'There's some people out there I want you to meet,' she said with a smile, and opened the door.

Elesa stepped through. An unmarked pelican had landed on the pad. As she watched, the back door fell open, and a figure stepped through. Elesa's heart skipped a beat as she saw who it was.

'Midori!' she shouted, and broke into a run. Midori turned as Elesa grabbed her in a hug.

'You're alive!' Elesa cried joyfully. 'I thought you were dead!' Tears formed in the corners of her eyes.

'It was a close thing,' Midori replied, a faint smile on her face. 'But we made it.'

Vivian walked past them to greet another spartan who had gotten out of the pelican. Elesa recognized him vaguely. Wasn't he the leader of Vermillion?

'Midori...' Elesa cleared her throat nervously. 'Did Gigolo... is he with you?'

Midori frowned. 'Yeah, he's with us. Why?' Elesa pushed her question aside and stepped into the back of the pelican. Gigolo stood inside, leaning into the cockpit. He turned around as she approached, and a look of delight lit up his face.

'Elesa! I... uh...'

Elesa walked straight up to Gigolo and pulled him into a tight embrace. Gigolo tensed, surprised, but then relaxed.

I could come to like this, Elesa realized with a small shock. Was

this feeling love? She didn't think so, but then she'd never loved anyone before. Small surprise; it was said that even in 400 years of life a spartan was lucky to love one person. With a feeling of regret, Elesa pulled away from the hug.

'So... you missed me too?' Gigolo asked, trying to smile and look confused at the same time.

'I thought you were dead!' Elesa shouted. To his credit, Gigolo barely flinched.

'Definitely missed me then,' he said mischievously.

Elesa glared at Gigolo, and then grabbed his arm. She pulled him out of the Pelican and started to walk away with him.

'Tell me how you escaped,' she said. Gigolo opened his mouth, and then turned suddenly back to the pelican.

'Atlas! Are you coming?' he shouted. Elesa frowned. Atlas was still alive? That could be an issue. Atlas was a bad influence on Gigolo, she was sure. Midori gave a sudden start, and looked towards the pelican.

Atlas walked out slowly. He looked around the assembled Spartans and gave a sigh.

'I'm not coming,' he said finally. There was a moment of silence.

'Where will you go?' Midori asked.

Atlas shrugged. 'South, somewhere. If you don't mind, I'd like to take the pelican.'

'You... keep in touch, okay?' Gigolo said, his voice uncertain. 'Stay alive.'

'I'll try,' Atlas replied. He turned and walked back into the pelican. The Spartans watched in silence as the aircraft lifted off and turned to fly southwards.

'Why?' Elesa asked quietly.

'Something happened back in Aspertias,' Gigolo said. 'It changed him.' Gigolo shook himself. 'But this is for the best. He didn't want to stay around us, not after how he treated Midori.' He watched the rapidly shrinking pelican. 'I think he needs a new start.'

Soft footsteps sounded behind them as Midori turned and left.

'Midori?' Elesa called after her friend. Midori ignored her.

'Is she going to be okay?' Gigolo asked, a note of concern in his voice.

'I think so,' Elesa replied. 'I think she just wanted closure. I hope she got it.'

The pair stood in silence for a while. Eventually Elesa sighed, and nudged Gigolo in the ribs.

'So,' she said, 'You were telling me how you escaped...?'

Talking amicably for the first time, Elesa and Gigolo wandered back into the tower, illuminated by the first rays of the rising sun. The sun rose higher, illuminating the great city of Nasces as it went about its business. It passes high across the sky, and then fell back beyond the horizon again, unchanged for what it had seen.

The day passed, and for once not one of the survivors of Aspertias had someone try to kill them. That refreshed them considerably, and raised their spirits with hope for the future.

G

Gigolo lay in the darkness, Elesa's sleeping form next to him. He stared at the ceiling contentedly.

I earned this. I bloody earned it.

E

Elesa wasn't sure why she'd ended up sharing a room with Gigolo, but she wasn't about to complain. Midori's advice had made her cautious with men, but Gigolo had confounded her expectations by just getting into bed and falling asleep quickly. Should she be glad that she wasn't being pushed, or insulted that he didn't seem the slightest bit interested? Still, there was the rest of her life left for such things. She could wait a little while.

L

You're despicable.

Lucas grinned as he looked at Midori's back, his arms around her waist. Yes, he was despicable, but if this was what he got from it, then surely it couldn't be too bad?

M

Lucas' arms felt nice around her waist. He'd been so nice to her, consoling her over losing Atlas all day, and then when she'd gone to bed he'd gotten in next to her. Midori hadn't had the heart to tell him to piss off. He probably thought she was easy pickings- he certainly was to her. She'd have to break it to him sometime though. Maybe in the morning. Better to tell him early than make Lucas think he had a chance with her.

V

Tomalon and Zero had been staring daggers at each other all day. Zero had gotten wind from somewhere that Tomalon liked Vivian, and seemed to have decided that the other spartan was encroaching on his territory. Tomalon had reacted the same way. It was downright embarrassing.

Vivian tried to get comfortable in her bed. If they both kept acting like they were, she wouldn't spend time with either of them. That

would show those childish morons.

16. The Solar Straits (1)

The Solar Straits

The morning sun shone upon the great northern city of Nasces. Citadels and towers crowded for attention, resplendent beneath the sun. The city glistened, dazzlingly beautiful.

In a small tower towards the edge of the city, Vivian leaned back and sighed.

'Give them a break. It's only been a day, after all,' Samael said.

'Only a day for them to forget how to be punctual, you mean?' Vivian replied. Samael grinned.

'They need some discipline,' Tomalon put in. 'They're not on holiday.'

'Mmm, and you ran a very tight ship with Vermillion, didn't you?' Zero asked, his voice scathing. 'It became a running joke among us, you and your legendary lateness.'

'Zero, please,' Vivian said.

'I'm here, aren't I?' Tomalon responded. 'While your squad- yes, yours- is not.'

'My squad?' Zero said, a touch of cold humour in his voice.

The door opened slowly and two Spartans walked in. Gigolo stood tall in his white and red armor, laughing at some inanity, while Elesa stood at perfect shoulder height, in pure white armor.

Gigolo's laughter died as he saw the expression on Vivian's face.

'We're not that late, are we?' he asked nervously, checking the clock on the wall. 'Lucas and Midori aren't here yet.'

Samael spoke quickly. 'Take a seat, please,' he said, getting up to show them a pair of chairs. 'We've not been waiting long.' Vivian saw from his worried glance that Gigolo wasn't fooled.

'Are we expecting Alcor?' Zero asked.

'He's busy with something or other, so no,' Samael said.

There was a silence.

'I guess Lucas and Midori are planning on missing this one, then?' Vivian asked. 'We'll start without them.' She cleared her throat. 'As you are aware, we, the survivors of Aspertias, are in a precarious situation right now. We need to tie ourselves to a clan, or when we next die we won't wake up again. Samael has kindly offered to let us join the Black Runners.' Vivian looked around the seated Spartans.

'Any objections?'

'Is there a catch?' Gigolo asked.

'Other than having to follow the rules of the Black Runners, which are pretty lax anyway, no.'

'Will we be split up?' Elesa asked quietly.

'I've suggested that you be kept together as a special operations unit, since you have more experience fighting Blackheads than anyone else in the clan,' Samael said. 'We'll keep you together.'

'Anything else?' Vivian asked. Nobody spoke. 'Then we'll be leaving for the Black Runners base in an hour.'

There was a loud thump, and the door flew open. Midori tumbled in, laughing, Lucas close behind her. The pair stumbled to the floor, giggling and kissing. Vivian sighed and buried her head in her hands; Elesa and Gigolo looked away, embarrassed. Eventually Midori noticed her audience and pushed Lucas away, getting to her feet.

'Sorry we're late,' she said, holding herself awkwardly. Lucas smiled widely.

'Just... just sit down,' Vivian said tiredly. Beside her, Zero and Tomalon had both turned bright red. 'We're going to join the Black Runners in an hour. Any problems?'

'Don't we get a say in this?' Lucas asked.

'If you wanted a say, you should have come on time,' Vivian replied, frowning. 'Anything else?'

'I've thought of something else,' Gigolo said. He continued at Vivian's signal. 'Who'll be in charge?'

Vivian looked to Samael, who shrugged. 'You'll be in the chain of command as a squad, so you'll follow orders from commanding officers. Internally, I suppose Zero will be in command.'

Gigolo shook his head. 'No. Nu-uh. I won't go along with this if he's in charge again.'

'I'm right here,' Zero hissed.

'Who would you rather was in charge, then?' Tomalon asked.
'You?'

'He'd be better than you,' Zero muttered. Tomalon turned to face him, face taut with anger.

'Both of you, stop!' Vivian shouted. 'Would you just quit being such morons!'

There was a silence, and then Lucas whistled appreciatively. 'You seem to be in charge already,' he said casually.

'Yeah!' Midori said. 'Why don't you take the lead, Vivian?'

Vivian looked to Samael again. He shrugged, again. 'I don't mind if you want to take charge. You're certainly competent enough.'

'We'll vote on it,' Gigolo said firmly. 'All in favour?' Everyone except Zero and Tomalon raised their hands.

'I think that settles it, then,' Samael said. 'I'll get it formalized when you're inducted.'

'That's all, I think,' Vivian said. 'You can go now.' She pulled up a map of Solidade and started leafing through it. When she looked up, everyone but Tomalon had left.

'Do you want something?' Vivian asked.

'You played that very well,' Tomalon said.

'If you're saying I wanted to be voted leader,' Vivian replied, 'then you're wrong.' She looked down at the maps. 'I noticed you didn't vote for me.'

'I'm hardly a member of your squad.'

'Is that humility or arrogance? Neither stopped Lucas from voting.' Tomalon shook his head, and walked away. With a sigh, Vivian continued her work.

2

Gigolo stretched, yawned, and stood up from the table. With a nod to Lucas, he took Elesa's arm and walked out of the meeting room.

'So, we've got an hour to spare,' Gigolo said. 'Want to hit the bar?'

Elesa nodded. 'One moment,' she said, and jogged away. Gigolo watched in confusion. He liked Elesa, but was it too much to ask for her to say a little more?

'Gigolo,' Zero called. Gigolo jumped, then turned around, his face carefully passive.

'Yes?' he asked, keeping his voice neutral. Gigolo didn't want a confrontation with Zero, not now. 'I'm a little busy. Can it wait?'

'No, it can't,' Zero said. He walked slowly to Zero, staring him in the eye. 'Why did you do that?'

'Uh, what?' Gigolo asked, backing away. Had Zero always been this aggressive?

'You know what,' Zero replied. 'Why?'

'Look, I'll be frank with you- you're not the best leader.' Gigolo's mind raced, searching for ways out. Should he call for Vivian? Whose side would she take? Surely she'd take his...? 'I mean, you're a great tactician and all, but I thought maybe Vivian would be better at leading us.'

Zero stood still for a while, and then sighed. 'Fine.' He turned away. 'At least you put it to a vote this time.' Zero started to walk away.

Gigolo stared after him, surprised. Hadn't he been angry just before?

'Uh...' Gigolo walked after Zero. 'Hey!' He shouted. Zero glanced back. 'I'm... uh, I'm sorry. For being a bit of a dick. Me and Atlas, we...' Gigolo fidgeted. 'We were wrong to do what we did.'

Zero nodded. 'It caused a lot of trouble. That said, if you hadn't stirred things up, would be here, now? Not that it was good, mind,' he added hurriedly, 'but just think it through.' With a faint smile, he turned to walk away. When he was almost to the nearest corner, he turned.

'Oh,' he shouted, 'Good luck with Elesa! She's a good girl!'

Gigolo watched Zero leave. That was unexpected. Still, he felt some relief. It was good knowing that Zero didn't hold too much of a grudge against him.

'Who's a good girl?' Elesa asked, appearing at Gigolo's elbow. Gigolo jumped again.

'Nobody!' He shouted, his heart racing. 'Uh... that was Zero. He just left.'

Elesa frowned at Gigolo, and then shook her head. 'We can go to the bar now.' She started walking off.

'What did you need?' Gigolo asked, catching up with her.

'Hip flask,' Elesa replied, producing a large bottle from her coat. 'It might liven things up a little when we go to Solidade.'

Gigolo laughed. Would she ever stop surprising him?

3

You're a terrible pilot.

Lucas sat in the pilot's seat, sizing up the controls. The bird had been modified for speed and manoeuvrability, having served as a VIP transporter before. Nothing to different about the layout, though, and it shouldn't be too difficult to learn how it flew.

'Mind if I sit up here?' Midori walked into the cockpit and pulled herself into the copilot's seat. Lucas watched her climb, admiring her body, and was very glad he'd decided to seduce her.

You're a perverted old man.

But I'm only 100, Lucas thought back. He wasn't that old, though he was compared to Midori. Young and beautiful; he'd gotten himself a good catch there.

'Only if you rub my back while I fly,' he replied, a grin across his face. Smiling, Midori freed a leg and started poking his

shoulders.

'You ready Lucas?' Vivian asked over the radio.

'All clear to take off,' Lucas replied.

'Then we're off,' Vivian said. Lucas adjusted some controls, and then lifted the Pelican off the ground and into the air, pointing south towards Solidade. His mind wandered idly towards Vivian. She was hot- all of the women in this squad were, actually- but she was also scary, not to mention the fact that Zero and Tomalon were already fighting over her. Plus, there seemed to be a whole lot of politics floating around her. Lucas avoided politics where possible; they made it harder to have fun.

You already have a girlfriend.

There's no law against looking, Lucas replied.

No law besides common decency, his conscience said, and then withdrew.

'What's that sparkly band, over to the west?' Midori asked, still kneading his shoulders.

'That's the Solnas bridge,' Lucas replied. 'It links Solidade with Nasces.'

'It's very bright.'

'That's less of an issue closer up,' Lucas said. 'It's actually made of the same stuff as the Gates are. Totally indestructible. Just as well, since people have been blowing it up since it was built, most likely.'

Lucas raised the pelican's altitude some more, careful to keep it high enough to be out of pot-shot range. It wouldn't do to be shot down now, just as they were about to become safe from dying again. That really would be cruel.

'Nasces is really big, huh,' Midori said. She leaned forward in her seat, craning her neck for a better view of the city. 'Look at all those towers!'

'It's one of the world's great cities,' Lucas replied. 'It's called the solar city. All of the older buildings are made of reflective materials, making a pretty light show at dawn and dusk.'

'You've been here often?'

'On missions and transport runs, yeah. Plus a couple of times on holiday. Nasces has some nice restaurants- remind me to show you some.'

'Oh, I'll remind you,' Midori said with a laugh.

The pelican started to pick up speed, and in a few minutes was out over the Solar Straits. Great ships sailed the waters below them, carrying transport from as far away as Oaktier, far to the west, and Daath on the eastern continent. Ahead of the pelican lay the central

continent, stretching out into the distance. The city of Solidade reared up in front of them, looking like a smaller copy of Nasces. The SolNas bridge split the waters, connecting the hearts of the twin cities.

'Have you ever been to Solidade?' Lucas asked.

'Nope. Never been further south than Nasces, and then only on missions.' Midori sighed. 'I'd always thought to go with Atlas someday, but we never got around to it. Now...'

Lucas remained quiet, not trusting himself to say the right thing. He'd not met this Atlas, but from the looks of it he'd left Midori in quite a state.

_Not that you care. No, you positively relish it. _

What can I say? I love a challenge. Besides, she'll be in a better situation when I'm finished.

You're taking advantage of her weakness.

_So? _

Muttering quietly, his conscience withdrew again.

'Are you okay?' Midori asked, breaking his thoughts. Lucas nodded.

'I'm fine. Hey, we should go out when we're done at the Black Runners. We'll find somewhere to have a meal.'

'That sounds good,' Gigolo said, walking into the cockpit. 'Do you know anywhere?'

'A meal out? All of us?' Elesa asked, walking behind him.

'Yeah!' Midori said. 'We haven't done that since... well, ever. It'll be fun! We can all dress up.'

Lucas felt an urge to hit his head on the control panel. Still, it would give him a chance to talk to the rest of the squad, get to know them a little.

'Just us?' he asked.

'The rest too,' Midori said. 'We could even invite Alcor and Samael.'

'Sounds good to me,' Lucas said.

'Yeah- hey, that's a sight,' Gigolo said. 'Is that where we're going?'

'That's Solidade,' Midori replied, pointing at the city.

'We're heading a little south of the city,' Lucas said. 'The main Black Runner base isn't actually in Solidade.'

'But we'll still be able to get a meal in the city later,

right?'

'If anyone says we can't I'll sneak us all out in the bird,' Lucas replied, smiling.

Gigolo grinned. 'Vivian would kill us if we tried that.'

'She'd have to get past Elesa first,' Lucas said.

'Me? Shouldn't you be the one protecting us?' Elesa asked.

'What, me?' Lucas struck a noble pose in his seat. 'I'm a lover, not a fighter.' Midori started giggling. Lucas frowned at her, which set her off laughing.

'I think she needs a bit more convincing,' Gigolo said, smiling. Lucas shrugged and turned back to the controls.

There was a tap on his shoulder. Lucas turned around to see Elesa leaning in close.

'Thanks,' she said. 'It's been ages since Midori's laughed like this.'

'It's my pleasure,' Lucas replied. 'Genuinely.'

4

Elesa eyed the machine in front of her apprehensively.

'Are you sure this is safe?' she asked, a note of concern in her voice.

'I'm sure it'll be fine,' Alcor said dismissively. 'It's been done before countless times.'

'To people with no clan ties?'

'Well, no,' Alcor replied, 'but I'm told the principle is the same. Besides, you've done this before, haven't you?'

'Yeah, a decade ago,' Elesa said. She sighed, and rubbed her eyes. 'Let's get this over with.'

Alcor moved over to the controls for the machine. 'Samael said I could induct you, just this once,' he said, eyes twinkling.

'Why?'

'It's an area of interest to me,' Alcor said. 'How the cores work, how induction occurs- it's all linked. I've never had a chance to see an unaligned Spartan be inducted, so I decided I'd come along and see this one.'

'You've done this before, right?' Elesa asked apprehensively, stepping into the machine. Small metal rods extended from the sheer edges, filling the space around her. They started to glow faintly, and then brightened, accompanied by a whining noise.

'I've observed enough times to be able to do it myself, I'm sure,' Alcor said, and pulled a lever. 'Here we go!'

Elesa put her hands up. 'I really don't think this is a good idea-' And then it occurred. There was a sudden flash of light, and a wave of heat surged through her body. Despite expecting it, Elesa stumbled, and let out a cry. The heat left a throbbing in her bones.

'That wasn't so bad now, was it?' Alcor shouted over the din of the machine. The rods retracted, and Elesa walked out of the inductor, rubbing her arms.

'I don't remember it hurting that much,' she muttered.

'It hurt?' Alcor asked, surprised. 'That's not supposed to happen.' His face took on a thoughtful look. 'I'd best ask around the others, see if it hurt for them too.' Elesa coughed. 'Oh, sorry,' Alcor said hurriedly. 'How does it hurt?'

'It aches,' Elesa said. 'Thanks for asking.'

'Apart from that, do you feel anything abnormal?'

'Not really,' Elesa said. 'Did it work all right?' She twisted her neck to look at her shoulder, where the clan emblem would normally be. To her great relief, the black falcon emblem of the Black Runners was visible clearly on her armour.

'Everything went smoothly,' Alcor said. 'You're now linked to the core, so you'll be brought back if you die. Samael said he'd link you into their other systems once everyone has been inducted.'

There was a knock on the chamber door, and then Gigolo pushed his way in.

'You okay?' he asked Elesa, rubbing his shoulders.

'It hurt a bit,' Elesa said. 'You too?' Gigolo nodded, grimacing.

'Fascinating,' Alcor said. 'Not to make light of your pain,' he added hurriedly. Gigolo glared at him, and then frowned.

'You're not from the Black Runners?' he asked, surprised.

'This is Alcor,' Elesa interjected quickly. 'He's from the Builders. He's a friend.'

'I asked if I could perform Elesa's induction,' Alcor said. 'I take it you're Gigolo?'

'Yeah,' Gigolo said, looking suspiciously at Alcor.

Oh, please don't, Gigolo! Elesa hoped he wasn't about to get angry at Alcor. She could have male friends, and he would just have to live with it.

'Elesa speaks of you often,' Alcor said. 'Perhaps we could have a drink sometime?'

'Yeah,' Gigolo replied, smiling. 'That would be nice.' The suspicious look vanished from his face. 'So, the Builders? Are they a northern clan?'

'Central Southern, actually,' Alcor replied. 'I'm surprised you haven't heard of us. We're quite a large clan.'

'Actually, the name does seem familiar,' Gigolo said. 'Uh... Cressat, right?'

'Spot on,' Alcor said. 'Though we've influences elsewhere.' Gigolo nodded thoughtfully.

'Well,' he said, rolling his shoulders, 'We should get going. Do you know where the others are?'

'Midori said said she wanted you to go to the level 2 bar,' Samael said, walking in. He nodded to Alcor. 'Good morning, Alcor. Did you get the results you wanted?'

'No, sadly,' Alcor said. 'Everything went as usual.'

'Hey!' Elesa glared at him, and he held up his hands.

'Not that I wanted anything else to happen,' he said hurriedly. Samael laughed.

'Well, shall we get going?' he said, rubbing his hands. 'I hear Midori has a suggestion for us.'

'Wait!' another voice called. A Spartan in white armour ran into the room, panting slightly. 'Samael, wait!'

'June?' Samael said, surprised. 'What is it?'

'Where's Zero? He was supposed to be being inducted today, wasn't he?'

'You know Zero?' Gigolo said, surprised. June turned to Gigolo.

'Yes. We're both from Aspertias.' She looked Gigolo and Elesa up and down. 'Are you from Aspertias as well?'

'Yeah,' Gigolo said. 'Hey- weren't you the president or something? Before the rebellion?'

'That's me,' June said. 'Anyway, I have to get going. Thanks, Sam.' With a little wave to Alcor she turned and jogged away.

'Funny lady, that one,' Alcor said, nodding at the door. 'She's in an admin role here, isn't she?'

'Yes. In charge of intelligence, or something like that,' Samael said.

'You never said there were any other Aspertians in the Black Runners,' Gigolo said accusingly.

'You never asked,' Samael replied, frowning. 'But I don't think there are many others. A small group came with June a little while back; apparently they'd been on the wrong side in that uprising you had.'

'There wasn't a right side,' Elesa murmured. Now that she thought about it, it had been the rebellion which killed Aspertias. In its weakened state, the clan didn't stand a chance against the Blackheads.

'Well,' Samael said. 'Now that that's over with, shall we be off?'

5

The Black Runners base was a sprawling compound built in the open grasslands south of the city of Solidade. A 10 meter wall enclosed various above ground buildings- air pads, housing, recreational facilities and offices to name but a few- with open parks and lakes filling the gaps between them. The bulk of the base, though, was below ground. 20 levels of tunnels lay below the rolling plains, filled with all the facilities and spaces a large clan like the Black Runners needed. Though none of the buildings rose more than 5 stories, the base was actually slightly larger than Aspertias had been.

'Isn't it a disadvantage, being spread out like this?' Midori said. 'If you're attacked you have a larger area to cover.'

'So does whoever is attacking, though,' Lucas replied. 'Actually, most bases are like this. Aspertias was quite unique- it's a shame I only got to see it a few times.'

Midori sighed wistfully. 'I hope we can see it again someday. Say what you like about the clan, the Aspertias base was really something.'

'You'll see it again,' Samael said, entering the bar. 'Sooner rather than later, if we get these plans off the ground.' He walked past the bar and took a table at the window, waving for Midori to sit. Gigolo, Elesa and Alcor had entered after him, as had Tomalon, Zero and Vivian. The 9 Spartans all took places around the table, picking up drinks from the bar staff.

'Plans, Samael?' Alcor said enquiringly. 'I'm hooked.'

Samael chuckled. 'They're not finished yet. Don't worry, you'll hear about them in due course. What we're here to plan is a relaxing night out for the lot of you.'

There was a surprised silence.

'A... night out?' Vivian said slowly. 'What, you mean like a mission?'

'Are we going to be fighting again?' Midori asked, slightly annoyed.

'No, no, nothing like that,' Samael said, waving his arms. 'I mean a night off. Tonight, to be precise. All to yourselves.'

'To do what?' Gigolo asked.

Samael sighed. 'Have none of you had a day off before? Go into Solidade. Have a party. Get drunk if you like. Enjoy yourselves. We'll pay.'

Alcor smiled. 'They're not city people like you, Samael. I think the concept of a night out is quite alien to them.'

Midori looked carefully at Samael, and decided he wasn't trying to make fun of them.

'So,' she said carefully, 'You want us to go out and have fun? With no strings attached? Just a night, all to ourselves?'

'No, he's got an ulterior motive, I'm sure,' Tomalon said, eyes narrowed. 'Who do you want us to sleep with?'

Samael laughed, then frowned. 'I assume you're joking. Please say you're joking.'

'Tomalon is just a little surprised, I'm sure,' Vivian said quickly. 'As we all are. Anyway, I think we should ask your opinion on where to go, since none of us have spent much time in Solidade before.'

Lucas leaned over to Midori. 'A night to ourselves sounds just perfect, don't you think?' he said conspiratorially. 'Just you and me.' Midori giggled, attracting a glare from Vivian.

Samael frowned. 'I haven't spent that much time in Solidade myself, to be honest,' he said.

'The Savoy is supposed to be a nice place to eat,' Alcor said offhandedly. 'A pleasant atmosphere, and exquisite food.'

'And also criminally expensive,' Lucas whispered. 'Clever Alcor knows that Samael doesn't know that, though.'

'That sounds nice,' Samael said. 'We'll go there then. If we all meet in the hangar at 8 this evening, I'll arrange a lift to the restaurant.'

'What should we wear?' Vivian asked. 'Should we just go in our armour?'

'Heavens no!' Alcor exclaimed. 'The bouncers would never let you in dressed like that!'

'So, evening wear?' Elesa asked quietly. 'We don't have any spare clothes.'

'Well, if Samael's paying, I don't see why we can't go and buy some,' Midori said.

'Yeah, there's bound to be some designer shops in Solidade,' Lucas added. 'We've got a few hours- how about we head off now?'

Samael looked around, flustered. 'I don't think you should- oh hell,

it's not my money anyway,' he said. 'Oh, but Zero, Tomalon and Vivian, you have to stay here. There's a war meeting in an hour, and the bid cheese asked for the three of you to be there. Alcor, too.'

Vivian shrugged. 'Elesa knows my size. Gigolo, can we trust you to get suits for Zero and Tomalon?' Gigolo nodded, a sickly smile on his face.

'Sweet!' Midori said, getting up. 'Let's get going then!'

17. The Solar Straits (2)

6

Solidade, while smaller than Nasces by a fair margin, was still a pretty large city. It sprawled over miles of the northern coastline of the central continent. In the north lay the docks; vast industrial complexes just below them; and clan structures and commercial centres to the south. Such a huge city naturally sported an equally huge shopping centre, catering to all clans near and far. Peace was enforced by a whole clan of Spartans, whose income revolved around the mall.

In several hours of hard shopping, Lucas and Midori hadn't seen half of the mall. Exhausted, they dropped their bulging bags off at the pelican (Midori had been astonished to find several years of back payments in her account, having not known that Aspertias gave her a cut of her spoils) and headed off into the darkening city, promising Elesa and Gigolo that they'd be back soon.

'I never knew places like this existed,' Midori said, taking in the panorama.

'Surely you've been to a city before,' Lucas said, surprised. 'Don't tell me you lived all of your life in Aspertias.'

'Well, Aspertias had everything I needed,' Midori replied. 'And my clan before that was so remote I never went anywhere. The only large place nearby was Gateway, and that was several hours flight away.'

'Where were you before?' Lucas asked.

'Elesa and me were in the Thoron- way up north, even compared to Aspertias. The base was covered in snow half the year.'

'Why did you move?'

'Aspertias went to war with us. It was a nasty war, long and brutal. We got pounded, the Strikers intervened on our side, then Aspertias called its allies in. Eventually a peace treaty was agreed upon. Part of the agreement was that Aspertias could take some Spartans from Thoron. The clan folded soon after- it's been taken over by the Strikers now.'

'You were taken by Aspertias?' Lucas said, disgust in his voice.

'Not taken,' Midori said with a sigh. 'The pair of us volunteered to go.'

The pair reached the crest of a small hill. Lucas sat down with a relaxed sigh. Midori sat next to him and leaned her head on his shoulder.

'It wasn't too bad in the end,' Midori continued. 'I met Atlas at Aspertias.'

'Things have a way of working out like that,' Lucas murmured. Midori shifted against him. Lucas savoured the feel of her body on his.

'So what about you? What's your story, huh?'

'Not as impressive as yours,' Lucas said. 'I was in the Scorpions my whole life. I trained as a pilot- got pretty high too, before I was demoted for sleeping with my CO's crush.'

Midori laughed. 'Sounds like you.'

'That's about as far as it goes.' Lucas smiled. 'But I've got plenty of time left. I think I'll be adding plenty more to my story before all this blows over.'

The pair sat and talked for a while, enjoying each others company. As the sun sank below the horizon they stretched their legs and stood up. Lucas turned to head back to the pelican, only to find himself staring into a gun.

'Don't move,' the gun's owner said quietly. Behind him two more shadowy figures slunk around to encircle Lucas and Midori.

'Black Runner scum,' one of them spat. 'Just kill them and take their stuff.'

'If I may,' Lucas began, but was cut off by the gun being jabbed into his face.

'Quiet,' the first Spartan said. 'We don't like Black Runners here.' She sized Lucas up, looking over him appraisingly. 'You don't dress like Black Runners.'

'That's because we're only temporarily in that clan,' Lucas said quickly. 'We're refugees from the north, heading south.'

'South?' The first Spartan asked. 'Running to the Builders for help?'

'Is that a bad thing?' Midori asked.

'We hate the Builders here,' the second Spartan said. 'Always meddling, thinking they have some right to rule us.'

'We have no affiliation with the Builders,' Lucas said, thinking quickly.

'Are we gonna kill them or not?' The third Spartan asked, sounding bored. 'Chief said to be back by six.'

'You said you were from the north?' The first Spartan asked. Lucas nodded. 'So you've seen these blackheads?'

'Yes. Horrible things.'

'Good. Kill the girl. We'll take this one with us.'

Everything happened at once. The Spartans aimed at Midori, who threw herself to the side. There was a crack, and the first Spartans head exploded. A shining sword impaled the second Spartan from behind.

Lucas threw himself to the floor as the last enemy Spartan opened fire. Gigolo swung the body, still impaled on his sword, and used it as a shield. There was another crack, and the third Spartan fell to the floor, dead.

'Are you okay?' Gigolo shouted, pushing the body off his sword and running to help Lucas up.

'Midori!' Elesa ran up the hill, sliding to a stop beside Midori.
'Midori!'

'I'm fine!' Lucas shouted. 'Help Midori!'

The three of them crowded around Midori, who lay on the ground, moaning softly.

'She's been shot in the arm,' Elesa said, her voice frantic. 'We need to get her back to the pelican. Quickly!'

7

Zero sat in silence as everyone in the meeting gave a quick introduction for his benefit. When it was his turn he stood up and gave his name and background, and then sat back down. Vivian and Tomalon followed after him. Alcor finished off, and then the Black Runners leader, Wren, stood up.

'On behalf of the Black Runners I welcome you to our clan,' she said, giving a small bow to the Aspertians. 'It is good to see you again as well, Alcor.' Alcor inclined his head; Vivian gave a bow back.

'I called this meeting to discuss our response to the Blackhead threat,' Wren continued. 'As you all know, they recently captured Aspertias, bringing the number of cores under their control to 29. Evidence suggests that their spawn rate is directly proportional to the number of cores they control.'

'It may be exponentially linked,' June said, shuffling some notes. 'Their spawn rate per core seems to be picking up as well.'

'In that case, we have no time to lose. We're facing a runaway crisis here. If we cannot stop the Blackheads soon we will never be able to.'

'The only reliable way of fighting them so far has been to destroy the cores they control,' Samael interjected. 'It seems that when the Blackheads capture a core it becomes vulnerable, and can be destroyed permanently.'

'Has this been tested?' Wren asked, looking at the Aspertians.

'We sent several missions to do just that,' Vivian replied. 'While it works in theory, in practice almost none of the missions succeeded. Inside the bases the Blackheads have the advantage over us. We lost too many troops.'

'I can confirm that it works, though,' Zero added. 'My squad destroyed the captured Torchbearers core, back before we knew what was happening. It stopped any Blackheads from spawning there.'

'How many other cores did you destroy?' Alcor asked Vivian.

Vivian hung her head. 'None. Meier called off the attacks after all the others failed. Our tactic from then on was to evacuate as many people as possible from the bases being attacked. I think Meier hoped to contain the Blackheads eventually, when there were too many Spartans in each base to be defeated.'

'Were any other clans using the same tactic?' Tomalon asked. 'Perhaps some other Spartans were rescued from Aspertias.'

June shook her head. 'As far as I know there was no organized evacuation from Aspertias, except for your group and mine.' She paused for a moment, and took in a ragged breath. 'They're all dead except for us.'

'Do you need a moment?' Wren asked. June shook her head.

'I'm fine.'

Wren rolled her shoulders thoughtfully. 'Destroying the cores could work, but we'd need a lot of manpower and time.' She shook her head. 'We'll look at that later. June, what do you have for us?'

June shuffled her notes. 'There have been two major developments on the Northern continent that I know of. Firstly, the clans of the Ghost Peninsular have banded together into the Ghost Alliance, led by Vernon of the Steel Templars.'

Tomalon grimaced when he heard the name.

'Is he a friend of yours?' Wren asked. Tomalon shook his head.

'We had an alliance. Aspertias, Vermillion and the Steel Templars worked together when one of us was seriously threatened. But Vernon and I... we didn't see eye to eye.'

Wren nodded. 'But if he knows you, then it might give us some bargaining power with him. How big is the Alliance?'

'Big enough to challenge Nasces,' June said. 'The Steel Templars and Pastorias are the only major clans in the alliance, but they've scooped up all of the minor clans in the region as well. All in all there's 35 clans involved, and about 150,000 Spartans.'

Samael whistled. 'That's big.'

'Only a fraction of what the Builders can muster if need be, I assure

you,' Alcor said.

'Your support is noted,' Wren said. 'Hopefully it wont come to a confrontation. Right now none of us can afford that.' She turned to June. 'What was the second development?'

'There have been reports of several large scale wars taking place near Gateway, in the very north of the world,' June said. 'I don't have many details but it seems like another alliance has formed there, and they're cleaning out any clans who don't agree with them.'

'They're aggressive?' Samael asked.

'Extremely,' June said. 'They're hostile towards any southern clans, it seems.'

'They shouldn't be a problem,' Wren said. 'They're a continent away from us, after all.' She clapped her hands. 'If that's all from you, we'll move on. Samael, I think you wanted to speak next?'

'Thank you. I've been concerning myself primarily with small scale tactics for fighting the Blackheads themselves. From what I've seen, the most effective tactics have been pretty much to just keep them as far away from us as possible.'

'They can't attack from a distance,' Vivian said. 'Which gives us an advantage.'

Samael nodded. 'Exactly. In terms of defences, the most effective types involved open areas which the Blackheads have to run through before they can reach any Spartans, but which we can fire down into. Killing fields, I think they're called.'

'They were effective at Vermillion,' Tomalon interjected. 'The only issue was that eventually our soldiers ran out of ammunition, or there were so many Blackheads that we couldn't kill them all.'

'Issues of scale,' Alcor said dismissively. 'We should be able to build defences big enough to avoid those problems.'

'What happens if the Blackheads go through the walls?' Zero asked.

'Can they do that?' Alcor asked, surprised.

'They wield energy swords, so in theory they should be able to.'

'They didn't at Vermillion,' Tomalon said. 'I didn't see them try it at Aspertias myself, but I wasn't on the front line very much.'

'We can build defences to avoid that,' Samael said. 'Thicker walls, or perhaps some contraption to short out the swords?'

'Actually, I've been looking into similar things,' Alcor said. 'Ways of increasing our Spartans survivability at close quarters.' He started typing into the keyboard by his seat, and a blueprint of a round shield appeared on the table.

'When Blackheads get into close range they almost always win. The energy sword they have kills instantly if it hits a major body part. So I designed this- a wrist mounted shield which, when hit, dumps its power into the sword. It charges from the shield battery on a Spartans armor, but since that doesn't help against the Blackheads anyway it's not an issue. It should give Spartans fighting the Blackheads a few seconds breathing room while the sword reboots. Enough time to get a long way away, hopefully.'

Wren looked at the schematic carefully. 'How long until you can get us a working model?' she asked.

'Not long, if I had access to your production facilities and personnel,' Alcor replied.

'You have it,' Wren said. 'I want working models as soon as possible.'

'Might I add something?' Zero asked.

'Go ahead,' Wren said.

'On the subject of survivability, there was one way we found of avoiding being killed by the Blackheads. You die permanently if you're killed by them, but if you kill yourself, then it doesn't count.'

There was a silence. 'That works?' Wren asked incredulously. 'It sounds like cheating, somehow.'

'It's happened to me,' Zero said. 'We were cornered, so I blew up my squad.'

'I hadn't considered that,' Alcor said thoughtfully. 'I might be able to design an armor mod which can kill the wearer in battle, saving them.'

'Work on that as a priority,' Wren said. 'Zero, I want you to lend your knowledge as well.' Zero nodded. 'Is there anything else?'

'Actually,' June said quietly, 'I think you'll want to see this.' She fiddled with her keyboard and the image of the shield was replaced by a picture, floating above the table.

'This was sent to me just now,' June said in the ensuing silence, 'from an area just south of Aspertias.'

'Well, shit,' Samael said quietly.

The image showed an entire valley filled with Blackheads, all of them running in the same direction. The black river stretched off into the distance, miles away.

'How long till they get here?' Wren asked.

'One week,' June said.

'Then we have no time to waste. Ready yourselves, for the destroyers

of worlds are on their way.'

8

Night fell silently across the twin cities of Nasces and Solidade, it's passing almost unknown to their inhabitants who lived in perpetual light. To the west the last rays were striking the merchant city of Oaktier, while on the edge of the eastern continent the grand city of Daath slept.

All was not calm though; further north a great dark plague swept down on the oblivious city of Nasces- a countless horde of Blackheads, marching ceaselessly onwards. A second host marched on the northern town of Gateway, where workers feverishly built defences as their time trickled away. A third host was forming in the south east of the OCP's held territory, pointed squarely at the ghost peninsula, domain of the despot Vernon. Smaller armies marched westwards and eastwards, snuffing out the divided northern clans as they went.

The intelligence of the OCP's plan was plain to anyone who cared to look, yet the powerful southern clans ignored it. It didn't fit in with their views of how the world worked, and so they went on with their everyday lives, oblivious to the tide of destruction crashing down on their heads.

'Just a scratch,' Lucas proclaimed loudly, 'Nothing enough to stop you, certainly.'

'I can't move my arm,' Midori said, glowering at her boyfriend. 'I was shot, for pities sake.'

'So you'll still be coming to the meal this evening?'

'Not unless you have a particular desire to see me eat food by leaning over and licking it,' Midori said. 'The medic said I need to rest my arm, so that's what I'm going to do. It should be fine tomorrow.'

'But you were looking forward to this!' Lucas exclaimed. 'We even went and bought special outfits for it.'

'Call it off, and we'll do it some other night,' Midori replied, sighing.

'Can't. Zero and his lot have already gotten there.'

'They left without us! Are Elesa and Gigolo still here?'

'They're waiting outside for you. So are you coming?'

'I told you, I can't,' Midori said. 'Why don't you go by yourself. I don't mind staying here alone.'

'I can't do that. You'd never forgive me.'

'Correct answer,' Midori said with a smile. 'I guess our evening is ruined.'

'Nothing for it, then,' Lucas said. He held out his hand to Midori and pulled her up. 'Mine, or yours?'

'Yours,' Midori said. 'I checked mine earlier today, and the springs were a bit worn.'

'Shall we go, then?' Lucas hooked his arm around Midori's and walked her out of the medical centre. Elesa and Gigolo were waiting outside, looking concerned and bored respectively.

'How is it?' Elesa asked quietly.

'It'll heal, but I can't go out tonight,' Midori replied.

'But you were so looking forward to that!' Elesa exclaimed.

'Yes, it's a shame,' Midori said, not looking upset at all.

'If you're staying, then we're staying as well,' Elesa said. 'We'll have our own meal.'

Gigolo frowned. 'We're staying?' He shook his head. 'I'd rather not.'

Elesa turned so that her back was to Lucas and Midori and looked at Gigolo for a few seconds. Gigolo began to look progressively more uncomfortable until he sighed. 'Fine. We'll stay.'

'I would kill to know what she just did,' Midori whispered to Lucas.

'I hope you never find out,' Lucas whispered back.

'Let's meet up at my place,' Elesa said as she turned back to Midori. 'In, say, an hour?'

'Sounds good,' Midori said. She took Lucas by the arm and walked briskly away.

'An hour?' Lucas sighed. 'She'll get suspicious if we're too late. Do you reckon you we can cut it short this time?'

'Shouldn't be a problem for you,' Midori replied.

9

To the north of the Black Runners base lay the shining city of Solidade. Thick grey clouds blanketed the city, and a sour drizzle fell from the sky as a storm moved across the solar straits to the north.

Such a great city had its fair share of restaurants, and it was to the very best of them that Zero, Vivian and Tomalon had come. Zero was glad it wasn't him paying. Samael, he reflected, was going to be getting a nasty surprise when he looked over their expenses.

'I guess they decided not to turn up,' Tomalon said eventually.

'What makes you think that?' Zero asked. 'The fact that it's been two hours and they're still not here?'

'Yeah. I guess it took you this long to think of that yourself, huh?' Tomalon replied. 'Not surprising, since you've never shown any intelligence in the time I've known you.'

'Tomalon!' Vivian said sharply. Tomalon shrugged, and looked away.

'I heard that Wren's planning an attack tomorrow,' he said. 'The OCP is going to move into the Maire valley soon, and she thinks it will be a good choke point to use.'

'Don't you think the Mairin might object to southerners coming and setting up shop there?' Vivian asked. 'They're a proud clan, by and large.'

'I doubt it, since they're under siege at the moment,' Tomalon said. 'They'd be indebted to us if we break it for them.'

'And how do you plan on doing that?' Zero asked. 'You couldn't save Vermillion.'

'I would have if you'd given us more support,' Tomalon said, 'But you decided a silly little civil war was more important than our lives.'

Zero glared at Tomalon. 'I had nothing to do with that,' he said.

'That's not how it looked from over here,' Tomalon replied. 'Right, Vivian?'

Vivian sighed. 'You did fight on the rebels side,' she admitted.

'Because otherwise Meier would have had me killed!'

'So you say,' Tomalon said.

Zero stood up sharply, kicking his chair back. 'And how would you know any different, huh?'

'I'm just saying that it seems a little odd.' Tomalon smiled at Zero. 'If you'd done nothing wrong, why did you need to flee south?'

'I just told you!'

'You expect me to take your word?' Tomalon asked. 'Prove that Meier was going to try and kill you.'

'You know I can't do that,' Zero replied.

'So you admit that you're a traitor and a liar, then,' Tomalon said.

Zero looked helplessly at Vivian, but she wouldn't meet his eyes.

'You're pathetic,' Tomalon said. 'No wonder none of your squad respected you.'

'Shut up!' Zero shouted.

'Cant you take the truth, Zero?'

'Shut up!' Zero lunged at Tomalon, a knife in his hand. Tomalon dodged, rolling off his chair, and Zero swiped at his face again. Tomalon caught his hand and twisted, forcing Zero to drop the blade. He held Zero in the arm lock.

'Like I said, pathetic.' Tomalon shoved Zero forward, sending him sprawling to the floor. When Zero looked up, a pair of security guards were standing over him.

'Do you want us to take him away?' They asked.

'I think that's best,' Tomalon said. Zero was hauled to his feet and dragged to the lobby, where he was flung out into the night. The doors slammed behind him, leaving him alone in the cold.

Zero slowly got to his feet. He turned away from the restaurant, cold anger seething in his chest, and began to walk away. He had to keep himself angry. It was the only way to fight off the despair battling for control of his mind.

18. The Solar Straits (3)

10

There was a knock at the door, and Elesa went to open it, leaving Gigolo tending the stove. Midori and Lucas were stood outside, dressed in their evening wear and looking slightly flustered. Elesa welcomed them in, taking Midori's arm and walking her over to the small dining table that had been erected in the lounge area.

'This really isn't necessary,' Midori protested. 'I'm not a cripple to be pitied.'

'I'm just trying to make sure you're comfortable,' Elesa said soothingly. She sat down next to Midori and opened her mouth to talk, but then shut it again as Lucas sat on Midori's other hand. Both of them stared at him until he excused himself, fidgeting uncomfortably.

'So?' Elesa asked as soon as Lucas was out of earshot.

'So what?' Midori replied.

'You know...' Elesa said, nodding meaningfully towards Lucas.

'Ah,' Midori said. 'Yes.'

'I knew it!'

'It's not that big of a deal,' Midori said. 'Surely you and Gigolo have sex all the time.' Elesa shook her head. 'You don't?'

'We've slept in the same bed, but Gigolo's never gone any further.'

'Have you considered that you might need to initiate it yourself?'

'I... I can do that?' Elesa looked shocked.

'Sure you can,' Midori said. 'Just act sexy.'

Elesa frowned. 'Uh...' she glanced at Gigolo. 'Sorry. This isn't really the place to be talking about stuff like this.'

'Sure it is. What do you think they're talking about?' Midori asked, gesturing towards the two men over in the kitchen.

'Cooking pasta is a delicate art,' Gigolo said. 'You've got to take it off at just the right moment. Too early, and it's impossible to eat; too late and it's all squidgy.'

Lucas nodded, chewing on a piece he'd taken from the stove. 'Another minute or so should do it, I think.'

'They're talking about cooking,' Elesa replied.

'Really?' Midori asked, surprised. She frowned, and then turned back to Elesa. 'That's odd. I was sure they'd be swapping stories about us, or something.'

'Let's not talk about that,' Elesa said, blushing.

'Alright,' Midori said. 'Did you hear about the mission planned for tomorrow? We're going to attack the blackheads, up north of Nasces.'

Elesa grimaced. 'Let's not talk about that either,' she said.

'Oh, sorry!' Midori said quickly. 'Is something the matter babe?'

'It's just...' Elesa turned away. 'I'm scared. I never used to be scared of fighting, when it was just me I had to worry about.'

'That's a good thing,' Midori said encouragingly. 'It shows you care about Gigolo, and I'm sure he cares about you. But I bet he doesn't worry too much, because he trusts you to come back alive.'

'Do you worry about Lucas?'

'Of course I do,' Midori replied. 'Lucas doesn't worry about much at all, though,' she continued. 'He told me that he likes to just take things as they come, and not worry about where he'll be in the future.'

'He's pretty laid back, huh? Gigolo's not like that.'

'Yeah,' Midori said, smiling faintly. 'It's made me think about my own life a bit.' She laid back on the sofa, staring up at the ceiling. 'I mean, I could die tomorrow, for good. That's terrifying; of course it is. But when I think about it a bit more, I find I'm not so scared. I've had a good enough life.'

'But you'll still fight, right?' Elesa asked.

'Of course I'll fight,' Midori said. 'I want to live- I have so much left to live for. But at the same time, I don't really mind the idea of death.' She sighed. 'It's strange, really. Back in Aspertias, right at the end, I felt so alive. It was as if my desire to survive was powering me, keeping me going. I had to find Atlas, to talk to him one last time.'

'You found him in the end, didn't you?'

'Yes, but you know what the sad bit is?' Midori said. 'I don't remember any of it. I only remember from when we were in the pelican, leaving Aspertias.' She laughed bitterly. 'I didn't get my farewell after all.'

Elesa was silent. She'd not asked Midori what had happened back in Aspertias, sensing that it was a sensitive topic. She'd just been glad Midori and Gigolo were still alive. Elesa glanced over at Midori, who was still leaning back on the sofa. A tear rolled from the corner of her eye.

Lucas was at her side in a flash. 'Are you okay?' he asked, taking her hand. 'What's wrong?'

'She was talking about Atlas, wasn't she?' Gigolo asked from behind Elesa.

'Yeah,' Elesa said. 'Do you know something about it?'

Gigolo sighed. 'I wish I did. Things got pretty... strange, towards the end. I got the feeling that neither she nor Atlas were in their right minds.'

Elesa could tell Gigolo was holding something back, but didn't ask. Atlas had been his friend as well. He could keep his secrets if he needed to.

Midori batted Lucas away and stood up. 'I'm fine, really,' She said, putting on a smile. 'Is dinner done? Let's eat.'

11

Vivian watched Zero from the corner of her eye as he got up and walked away into the night. He was angry, and trying not to show it, but she knew the signs. She was careful not to make her observation of him obvious, though, knowing that Tomalon wouldn't approve.

'Was that really necessary?' She asked, picking at her plate. 'You didn't have to cause such a fuss.'

Tomalon sighed, and gave her a contrite look. 'I'm sorry, it's just Zero... he angers me like nothing else.'

'Don't be sorry,' Vivian said. 'He started it, after all.' Tomalon nodded.

'I guess this hasn't been such a good evening for us after all,' he said, smiling ruefully.

'The night's still young,' Vivian replied, 'and the restaurant has a terrace outside.'

'Sounds good to me,' Tomalon said.

The pair settled their substantial bill and moved out onto the terrace. The restaurant occupied the top few floors of a skyscraper in the centre of Solidade, giving a stunning view of the surroundings. Snow had started to fall, and the sky was covered by a blanket of thick dark clouds, illuminated by the lights of the city.

'It's beautiful,' Vivian murmured, gazing out over the straits to the north. 'You can see Nasces from here.' The city shone, lighting up the far coastline such that even a blind man would have been hard pressed to miss it.

'It sure is,' Tomalon said. 'I'm glad you're here to see it with me.' He moved slightly, and put his arm around Vivian's waist.

A little forward, but I don't mind. Vivian moved closer to him, returning his gesture. The couple stood at the edge of the terrace, watching the world go by around them in silence.

'I'll make it up to Zero,' Tomalon said eventually. 'I know he's important to you.'

'Not as important as he used to be,' Vivian said with a sigh. She shook her head. 'You don't have to apologise to him for my sake.'

'I'd like to, for the sake of my conscience,' Tomalon replied.

And that's what I love about you.

Vivian smiled. For the first time in a long while she was truly happy. Although she hadn't realized it before, being with Zero had been a bad thing for her. He pulled her down and gave nothing in return. But Tomalon was everything that Zero could have been, back before things started to go wrong around him. And he was a clan leader, if only in name now.

'What are you thinking about?' asked Tomalon.

'Us,' Vivian replied.

'Same,' Tomalon said. He turned and looked into her eyes. 'Is this... a thing?'

Vivian smiled. 'I'm game if you are.'

12

There was only one easy route from the ruins of Aspertias to Nasces—the Maire valley, which ran from the edge of the Nasces flood plain up to the red valleys of Vermillion. The valley had long been controlled by the Mairin, a wealthy mercantile clan with strong connections to the Builders, who exacted their toll on anyone who wished to pass through their bridges and tunnels. The valley was also a strategically important location, filled with choke-points and

defensive terrain. It had even been said that the alliance's control of the valley had been the deciding factor in the Striker wars, hindering the advance of the Striker forces and preventing them from occupying Nasces. Sadly, the defences had not stood up as well against the massive host of blackheads.

The blackhead swarm had swept in from the north, overwhelming the meagre defences by sheer force of numbers and besieging the Mairin base. Startled and completely outmatched, the Mairin had called on the Builders for help. A last minute plan had been assembled, consisting of a force of Falcon gunships suppressing the blackheads from the air while an evacuation could be completed.

'We'll be coming up on the blackhead army soon,' Lucas said over the radio. 'Get those guns spinning.' He switched the intercom off and tried to rub his forehead only to remember he was wearing full armour.

Idiot.

I see you've run out of original insults at last.

You're going to die anyway. Why bother come up with more?

Lucas frowned. It wasn't like his conscience to be so depressive. Normally it just stuck to insulting him. It was also displaying an unusual level of awareness of the situation.

Lucas didn't actually expect to die, though. Despite the reports on the size of the enemy army- and by all accounts it was colossal, with hundreds of thousands of troops, if not millions- their weakness was in their weapons. Swords were useless against anything more than 10 feet away, and the entire attack was in gunships, out of range of the blackheads. It was going to be a slaughter.

'Why didn't we think of this earlier?' Lucas asked. 'It's the perfect counter to the blackheads.'

'Aspertias didn't have very many aircraft,' Elesa replied.

'The Black Runners don't either,' Midori added. 'Most of their air force is transports. Almost all of these falcons are on loan from the Builders, who coincidentally didn't have enough pilots to fly them.'

'What a mess,' Lucas said, shaking his head. 'I guess that means I can't trash this then.'

'Of course not,' Midori replied. 'We're carrying guests.'

Lucas checked the squad status again. Midori and Elesa's lights were bright in his HUD, indicating that they were in the same aircraft. Gigolo, Vivian and Tomalon's icons showed them in a falcon to the left of the formation. Zero's icon, however, was absent. The Spartan had gone missing sometime after leaving the restaurant the previous night, and had remained that way. He was either off grid or had sabotaged his radio somehow. Nobody seemed to have any idea where he might have gone.

He probably just wanted to get away from you.

He didn't know I existed, Lucas replied. _Just as well, since he seemed like bad news._

That just shows how pathetic and insignificant you are.

Wren's voice cut into his internal debate. The leader of the Black Runners was at the head of the formation in the command phantom. Lucas had never seen a phantom before the operation, but he knew he was in love. The aircraft flew so effortlessly and elegantly that it made a pelican look like a lumbering brute. He'd decided to begin saving his pay to try and buy one.

'All gunships, ready cannons.'

Lucas heard a whir as Midori and Elesa began to spin up the chainguns on the side of the falcon. He activated his own nose mounted gun, aligning it with his crosshairs.

The formation rounded a turn in the valley and all of a sudden the blackhead army was visible. It stretched across the valley like a huge black puddle, encircling the Mairin base which stood tall above the valley floor. The host stretched off for as far as Lucas could see- innumerable blackheads, each one capable of killing someone for good.

'Second squadron, spilt off,' Wren ordered.

Lucas kept flying straight, heading past the base into the centre of the blackhead army. To his left a smaller section of the gunship force split off to relieve the Mairin defences, taking Vivian's falcon with it.

'Spread your fire out,' Samael said over the radio. 'Remember, each blackhead takes just one shot to kill.'

Lucas passed over the edge of the blackhead horde. Far below him the enemy seemed at last to notice their aircraft, turning to watch as they passed above. Lucas began to lower the falcon's altitude, to give his gunners an easier time.

'Fire at will,' Wren said.

Lucas heard two roars as Midori and Elesa opened fire from their machine guns, spraying bullets into the horde of blackheads. Swathes of the blackhead army began to fall, cut down by hails of bullets. Lucas angled the falcon down and opened fire with his cannon, sweeping it from side to side in order to cover the most enemies. Blackheads fell in droves.

'All units, move away from the centre of the valley,' Wren ordered. 'Vultures are incoming.'

Lucas pulled his falcon leftwards, towards the Mairin base. He turned in his seat and saw the reason why they had been ordered to move- two colossal Vulture gunships were advancing slowly down the valley from the south.

'What on earth are those?' Midori asked quietly.

'Vultures,' Lucas replied. 'Uber units, designed by the Builders to destroy armies and bases.' Lucas was surprised to see them so far from Cressat; it was unheard of for the Builders to lend such expensive technology to any other clans. 'They must be taking this very seriously.'

The massive gunships paused, their cannons firing into the mass of blackheads. Holes opened on the upside of each aircraft, spilling smoke out into the air. Moments later, a flight of missiles fired from each Vulture and flew straight into the centre of the blackheads, engulfing an area hundreds of meters across in fire. When the explosions subsided, only the blackened ground was visible.

'Shit,' Lucas said, angling the falcon so he could get a better view. 'I'm glad they're on our side.'

'Keep firing,' Wren ordered harshly. 'Don't sit around gawking!'

Lucas lowered the falcon a little to get a better line of fire and opened up on the main cannon again, cutting into the blackheads. He heard similar roars from Midori and Elesa's guns, only for Midori's gun to fall silent again.

'Hey Lucas,' Midori said worriedly, 'What's going on beneath that other falcon?'

Lucas angled his aircraft to see what she was talking about. Another falcon was hovering 20 meters above the ground to his left. Beneath it the blackheads seemed to be going into a frenzy, clustering up and waving their swords in the air. The centre of the crowd seemed to rise, and Lucas realized with a chill that they were forming some sort of pyramid with their bodies. The falcon, unable to see directly beneath it, was oblivious to the danger its occupants were in.

Suddenly Lucas was struck by a very worrying thought. He pulled back on the controls and with a painful slowness the gunship began to rise into the sky.

'Why are we going up?' Midori asked.

'Because the blackheads are about to reach us!' Lucas shouted.

All of a sudden the crowd of blackheads beneath the other falcon convulsed, and a dozen of their number jumped high into the air. Lucas watched in horror as they landed inside the other falcon, quickly slaughtering its pilot and gunners. But had he gotten high enough?

A thud from below the aircraft gave him his answer. The falcon shuddered, and warning lights came on in the console, informing him of a broken fuel line. The blackheads, unable to jump into the aircraft, had instead sunk their swords deep into the base of the falcon.

'They're trying to get in!' Midori shouted, firing madly with her chaingun. A second thud sounded, and the aircraft lurched again, sending Elesa flying out the side. Desperately Lucas tried to right

the falcon, seeing the frenzied crowd of blackheads directly beneath him.

'Hold it steady Lucas!' Midori shouted. Lucas glanced out the side of his cockpit and saw to his horror that Midori was hanging out the side, holding Elesa's hand. 'I can pull you up babe!' Midori shouted. 'Just give me your other hand!'

'Pass me your knife,' Elesa said calmly.

'Just give me your hand!' Midori shouted. 'Elesa! Pass me your hand!'

'Give me the fucking knife!' Elesa shouted suddenly, swinging precariously below the gunship.

'Do it!' Lucas shouted.

'Why?' Midori shouted back.

'Just do it!' Lucas replied.

Midori pulled her knife from its sheath and passed it to Elesa, who used it to undo the catch on her helmet. In one swift motion she pulled the knife back and sliced across her throat.

'Elesa!' Midori screamed as her friend's body fell into the mass of blackheads, disappearing before it hit the ground.

'She's fine,' Lucas said, pulling the falcon out of range of the blackheads. 'She killed herself before they could.'

'Why? I could have saved her!'

'You wouldn't have been able to pull her up,' Lucas said, suddenly tired. 'I'm sorry, but this way she's safe.' Sighing, Lucas took a moment to scan the rest of the falcons. Less than half remained in the sky.

Wrens voice came through the radio, sounding ragged and uneasy. 'All units, fall back. Meet up at the rear staging post.'

'We lost,' Midori said.

'We'll be better prepared next time,' Lucas replied, turning the falcon around and heading for home.

No, you won't.

13

The order to fire came, but Tomalon barely noticed. His arms moved by themselves, picking targets and firing without the intervention of his brain. The falcon swerved low over the Mairin base, providing support for the beleaguered defenders, but Tomalon didn't pay them any attention. His mind was elsewhere.

Is it all my fault?

Had he been the reason why Zero had disappeared, leaving everything

behind? Tomalon didn't like the other Spartan much at all, but he'd never meant to cause offence. He hadn't had a chance to apologise either.

Vivian had taken the news of Zero's sudden disappearance surprisingly well, only making some comment about Zero running off again. Indeed, she'd seemed far more concerned about arranging a date for the pair of them, and bemused at Tomalon's worry.

The other occupant of the falcon was Gigolo, but he'd barely spoken a word since they'd set off. Tomalon had gathered that there had been some sort of debate amongst the other four Spartans as to who would come in the falcon with him and Vivian. Tomalon didn't mind much; he was just glad it wasn't Midori.

'Tomalon,' Vivian called from the cockpit, sounding rather concerned. 'Look at what's happening over the valley.'

Tomalon pulled himself back to reality and looked out into the valley, as Vivian had said. At first he wasn't sure what she'd meant, but then he noticed that several of the gunships were falling while black specks jumped from the valley floor up into the formation.

'I'm going to pull up a bit,' Vivian said, sounding nervous. The falcon started to rise slowly, only to stop moments later with a thud from somewhere below the floor.

'What was that?' Gigolo asked, having also apparently broken out of his thoughts.

'They're jumping,' Tomalon said. 'Vivian, pull up now!'

'I can't!' Vivian replied. 'Something broke when we were hit just now.' As she spoke there was another thud, and the falcon lurched to the side, beginning to fall slightly.

'I'm losing power,' Vivian said urgently. 'We're going to fall!'

'Stay calm,' Tomalon said. 'Try to get us over the base-'

His words were cut off suddenly as an almighty crash sounded from below and the falcon dropped like a stone. Tomalon was flung from the side of the aircraft and sailed through the air, landing heavily on a flat roof. The falcon fell past him, crash landing some way off.

Tomalon pulled himself to his feet and quickly checked himself for injuries before moving towards the crash.

'Vivian? Vivian!' Tomalon shouted desperately, trying to see where the aircraft had landed. He spotted it on a rooftop near to the blackhead lines and sprinted over to the burning wreckage.

His fears were soothed slightly when he saw Vivian's corpse lying on the ground next to the wreck. Tomalon turned away as soon as he had confirmed it was her; a rotor blade had sliced through her chest, leaving a grisly ruin behind.

A coughing noise brought him to Gigolo, who was sitting up by a wall, holding his head. One arm was broken and the other lacerated badly, but he was still alive.

'Are you okay?' Tomalon asked him. 'Can you move?'

Gigolo moaned something that sounded like a no. He seemed to be in severe pain, but as far as Tomalon could see there was nothing that should be causing him such problems.

'What's wrong?' Tomalon asked.

Gigolo moaned again. 'The... blackheads...' He managed through gritted teeth. 'They're... in... my head...'

What? That makes no sense._

Tomalon was about to ask what he meant when he was interrupted by the arrival of a Mairin soldier, who had come over the roofs from behind him.

'Were you in the falcon that went down?' The Spartan asked. 'You both okay?'

'I am, but he's going to need help,' Tomalon said. 'Help me move him.'

Between them, Tomalon and the Mairin carried the groaning Gigolo back to the Mairin line. Tomalon heard it before he saw it; gunfire was going off constantly as the Mairin held off the blackheads. A small operating base had been set up on the landing pad, which now appeared to be the only area of the base the Mairin still controlled. Tomalon and the other Spartan passed into the base during a short lull in the fire and headed for the medical area, where they set down Gigolo.

'What's up with him?' the Mairin Spartan asked, nodding to Gigolo.

'I'm not sure,' Tomalon replied. 'He's not too badly wounded.' He crouched down by Gigolo, checking him once again. Something important suddenly occurred to him.

'Do you still hold the core?' Tomalon asked.

'We lost it a few minutes ago,' the Mairin said. 'Is that an issue?'

Tomalon studied the Mairin; he still had his clan decals showing on his armour. Perhaps it wouldn't happen this time for some reason?

As he watched, however, the decals disappeared before his eyes, dissolving into nothing. The Mairin visibly shuddered, and glanced at his shoulder with horror.

The camp was suddenly quiet. Tomalon looked out over the assembled Spartans and saw them all checking their armour, expressions of anguish and pain on their faces. Some of them seemed to be crying.

No such lull came from the blackheads, who continued to run at the Mairin defences, covering the ground to the gun emplacements in seconds.

_We're going to die, _Tomalon realized.

Everything seemed to happen at once. Tomalon reached for the boltshot on his hip, intending to shoot Gigolo and himself. The blackheads reached the defences and began laying into the stunned Mairin with wild abandon, cutting them down in droves. Gigolo screamed, his eyes rolling back in their sockets, and the blackheads stopped attacking.

There was a moments pause while the defenders and the blackheads stared at each other, both sides shocked and confused by the turn of events. The blackheads then turned around and began attacking the row behind them. The row behind fought back, but for every one of the turned blackheads they felled, one of their number joined their enemies. The blackhead line was quickly forced back to the edge of the landing pad, where it held.

Tomalon tore his eyes from the spectacle and looked at Gigolo. The other Spartan was trembling, his eyes darting from side to side under closed lids.

Is he... controlling them? Tomalon recalled how he had said that the blackheads were inside his mind. And hadn't Atlas done something similar back at Aspertias? Could it be true?

'Can you hear me?' Tomalon whispered. Gigolo nodded slowly. 'Are you controlling them?' Again Gigolo nodded.

I promised Midori I'd never speak of what happened to Atlas, but this... It wasn't just him and Gigolo seeing it this time. The Mairin would certainly speak of it, if they survived.

That thought in his head, Tomalon radioed Wren on her private channel. She answered almost immediately.

'Tomalon! I thought you were dead for sure!'

'Still alive and kicking,' Tomalon replied. 'I'm at the Mairin camp. Where are the evacuation aircraft?'

'We recalled them after the blackheads started jumping,' Wren answered. 'It was too dangerous to continue. If you're there, you'd better just kill yourself. It's the only way to get out alive now.'

'Bring them back. We've got a perimeter of sorts set up here; it'll be safe to get the rest of the Mairin out.'

'How on earth did you manage that?'

'It's hard to explain,' Tomalon said, glancing at Gigolo. The other Spartan was sweating profusely, and looked to be in serious pain. 'I'll show you later. Just get the aircraft here.'

'I'll send some back,' Wren replied, 'They'll start collecting again as soon as they're sure it's safe.'

Tomalon closed the link and stood up, surveying the landing pad. The Mairin were milling about in confusion, pointing and staring at the battle unfolding by the hangar doors.

This is madness. With a sigh, Tomalon walked to tell the Mairin the news of their rescue.

However, he couldn't shake the feeling in his stomach that what Gigolo had just done would have consequences beyond saving a few soldiers lives. People were going to want control of his power, and Tomalon had a pretty good idea who those people were going to be.

19. Architects of Ruin (1)

Architects of Ruin

Elesa awoke in darkness, her heart pounding. She took a deep breath, calming herself, and then pushed her way out of the respawn chamber, running a hand along her neck. There was no trace of the wound which had killed her.

So it worked, then. I should let Midori and Gigolo know.

Elesa looked around. The respawn area for the Black Runners was new to her; it was a cavernous space with huge banks of the humming machines lining the walls. In the centre lay what was presumably the core, glowing with a soft blue light. Countless tubes ran into the cylindrical device, supplying it with power and materials. How it used them was anyone's guess; only the Builders knew, being the clan who made the cores. Perhaps they also knew how the OCP used the cores. If they did, they were staying silent on the matter.

Didn't Alcor say something about that? Elesa bit her lip, thinking back. He might have said something, back when they first met, but she couldn't remember what it had been. _No matter._

The respawn area was almost deserted; only a few technicians shared the space with her, preoccupied with their tasks. Wishing she had taken more notice on her brief tour of the base, Elesa set off to find someone who knew what was going on.

After a short time walking, Elesa heard voices from down a side corridor. She headed towards them, hoping to find someone to give directions, but quickly realized that she recognized one of the voices. What was Alcor doing down in the depths of the Black Runners base?

Something made Elesa slow down as she approached the source of the voices. As they turned from a dim buzzing into recognizable words she stopped entirely and began to listen.

'I've told you everything I know,' Alcor was saying. 'There was just one.'

'Then you were wrong,' said another voice, firm and authoritative. 'We've found another, one which you've been in contact with.'

'It's disappointing to hear that you missed it,' said a second, higher pitched voice. 'You said you were the best.'

'I am,' Alcor replied. 'I don't know how...' He moved, and Elesa missed the rest of what he was saying. She moved slightly, and his voice became clear again. '...happen again, I promise.'

'I'm glad to hear that,' the first voice said. 'You've been useful, Alcor.' Some more was said, but again Elesa couldn't hear it properly. She shifted again, trying to get closer to the voices without coming into sight.

'...used for keeping the northern clans where they belong, of course,' the second voice said. 'Too bad if that upsets you. I know you harbour some strange liking for them.'

'They are a hardy people, and resourceful,' Alcor replied. 'You'll have trouble taking them by force.'

'That's not my intention,' the first voice said. 'Let us see how these alliance talks go before we plan an invasion of Nasces, shall we?' There was a chuckle, but Elesa couldn't tell where it came from.

Alcor must have moved again, because his voice was indistinct when he replied. Elesa leaned as far as she could, trying to get a clearer angle.

All of a sudden there was an alarming creak from the floor below her. The voices shut up instantly, and footsteps began moving towards her. Realizing that she was going to be caught out, Elesa began walking forwards, hoping to seem natural as she rounded the corner.

Alcor was leaning on the wall, his head down. By him stood two tall Spartans with the same clan emblem as him, marking them as Builders. One had a harsh face and seemingly ingrained sneer, looking as if he had just laid eyes on something unpleasant. The other shocked her, for unlike most Spartans she had met he was very obviously old. His face was lined with wrinkles, and his hair was a shocking white, with some areas of his scalp bald entirely. He frowned at her with piercing eyes, evaluating her in an instant.

Elesa spoke first. 'Alcor? I was hoping you'd be able to show me to the ops room.' She stopped moving, and began to back up. 'Sorry- am I interrupting? I'll find my own way.'

'It's fine, Elesa,' Alcor said without raising his head. 'We were finished anyway.' He sounded weary, and eager to move on.

The sneering Spartan glared at Alcor, but the older one put a hand on his shoulder. 'We'll talk about this later,' he said in the first voice. 'We're heading up north to deal with... what we talked about. Meet us at the Alliance talks in a few hours.' The pair turned and walked away. Elesa watched them go, curious. Who were they to be able to make Alcor so unhappy?

'Those were probably the two most important people you'll ever meet,' Alcor said in a sarcastic tone, coming to stand by Elesa. 'The old one is Thompson, the Architect-General of the Builders. The one who looks like you just vomited on him is Andreus, his heir.'

'That old man is in charge of the Builders?' Elesa asked.

'For the moment, yes. He's nearly 400, and could die any day, hence the presence of his heir. When he dies, Andreus will take over.' Alcor grimaced. 'I'm not looking forward to that happening.'

'Why are they here?'

'You remember I told you that the Builders were taking an interest in the recent happenings up here?' Alcor asked. 'They've come to personally oversee the upcoming Alliance meetings.' Elesa put on a confused face, so he went on. 'The Builders want the clans of Nasces behind them when they go to fight the blackheads for real, so they're using these Alliance talks to try to hammer out a treaty.' He looked at her sideways, frowning. 'Anyway, you said you wanted to go to the ops room? Follow me.' Alcor began to walk away. 'Your friends are safe, by the way,' he added after a few moments. Elesa thanked him, distracted.

Does he know? What does he know? Elesa followed behind him in silence. There were so many questions she wanted to ask, but he might be angry if she revealed that she'd overheard his conversation. What are the Builders keeping from us?

2

It was as if he had been blind all along, ignorant of a sense he never knew he had. Trapped in the confines of his own mind, unable to see beyond his skull. Now Gigolo's eyes had been opened, and he could see farther than ever before. At least, he would be able to if his head would stop hurting long enough to piece two thoughts together.

Slowly the pain faded, and he became aware of his surroundings. He was in a small room, probably a cell, with a plain bed folded into the wall and a jug of water by the locked door. There was a definite sense of movement, and an ethereal hum surrounded him. Gigolo crawled to the water and downed it in two gulps, dispelling some of the fog in his mind.

Where the fuck am I? He had no recollection of the past few hours. Hadn't he been on some mission, fighting the blackheads? How had he come to be inside this cell? The blackheads never took prisoners.

Stumped, Gigolo turned his attention to the other issue at hand. When he closed his eyes, it was as if he could still see, albeit faintly. He was still limited in direct sight by the four walls of his cell, but it was as if he could sense presences further away. Most were fragments; barely noticeable and disappearing as soon as he tried to look at them. A few burned brighter than the others, appearing as small white stars to his other eyes. The strongest presence, however, was to the north. Gigolo could feel the blackhead army like a weight pressing down on him. It was worryingly close, feeling almost as if it were right below him.

The blackheads... I... controlled them? How?

Gigolo's memories were slowly returning to him. He'd been in a falcon

with Tomalon and Vivian. It had been shot down, and the crash had killed Vivian and wounded him. The blackheads had been about to overrun them, and Gigolo had been terrified. I was about to die, and I knew I would do anything to survive. There had been an odd feeling, like a pane of glass shattering inside his head, and all of a sudden he had been able to feel the blackheads in his mind. In that instant, he had known that if he exerted his will over them, they would obey. I told them to go away, and they obeyed. The ones I could control attacked the ones behind them, and as they fell I took the survivors. It must have worked, because he was still alive.

Does this make me a monster? Am I one of them? No, he couldn't be. So what was he?

His ruminations were interrupted by the cell door being opened. Gigolo shuffled back as the door swung inwards to reveal Tomalon, flanked by two guards. That answers one question, at least.

'I'm sorry about all this,' Tomalon said. 'Nobody quite knew what to make of you, so we decided to put you here while you slept.'

'You all saw what happened?' Gigolo asked. Tomalon nodded. 'Am I a prisoner now?'

'Sort of,' Tomalon replied. 'It's for our safety. Wren didn't want you running around free. Sorry.'

'I've done nothing wrong,' Gigolo said. 'I'm not a monster!'

'Hey, hey,' Tomalon said quickly. 'Nobody said you were, okay?' He walked into the cramped cell and took Gigolo's hand. 'I'll give you a hand up, and we'll go and sort this out.' Gigolo pulled his hand away and stood up by himself.

'Enough with the patronising bullshit,' he snapped. 'I'm not retarded either.' Tomalon shrugged, and turned around.

'Follow me,' he said, and began to walk away. With nothing better to do, Gigolo followed him. The two guards fell into step behind him, weapons in their hands.

'Wren's in the cockpit,' Tomalon said. 'Along with some other people who want to meet you.'

'Cockpit?' Gigolo asked, surprised. 'Are we in some kind of aircraft?'

'It's the Builder's mobile command centre,' Tomalon said. 'A modified vulture.' Gigolo grimaced. The Builders being involved was a bad sign.

They soon came to a door, which opened to reveal a large cockpit with a panoramic view of the terrain ahead. Several seats were arranged in front of controls by the windows, while a table had been set up in the centre of the room. Maps had been pinned to the wood, and figures placed on it to represent armies. It gave an oddly anachronistic feel to the place.

Sat in chairs around the table were three Spartans. Gigolo recognized

two of them- Wren, the leader of the Black Runners, and Samael, her second in command, but he had never seen the third one. He sat straight backed in his chair, eyes fixed firmly on Gigolo. Those eyes made Gigolo uncomfortable; they burned with an energy that seemed out of place on his obviously old body.

The Spartan he didn't know turned to Wren. 'Is this the one?' he asked.

'Supposedly,' Wren replied. 'Ask him yourself.' She fixed Gigolo with a cool expression.

The old Spartan stood up and walked over to Gigolo, looking him over thoroughly.

'Apparently, you can control Blackheads,' the Spartan said. 'Is this true?'

'Yeah,' Gigolo said warily. The old Spartan nodded thoughtfully.

'I want to see this with my own eyes,' he said. 'Open the bay doors.' The Spartan walked out of the cockpit. Wren and Samael stood up and followed him, Wren giving Gigolo some warning looks on the way out.

'Who was that guy?' Gigolo asked.

'Thompson,' Tomalon said. 'Head honcho of the Builders.' He tapped Gigolo on the shoulder. 'We'd best follow them.'

Tomalon led Gigolo to the Vulture's bomb bay, at the base of the aircraft. The doors had been opened, giving a view of the blackhead army several hundred feet below.

Thompson turned to Gigolo as he entered, fixing him with a piercing stare. 'Demonstrate your ability,' he ordered, gesturing to the blackheads below.

Gigolo shuffled up to the edge, looking nervously out into the sea of black Spartans.

How did I do it last time? It had just happened. How can I control it? What had he been doing before?

'What's the hold up?' Thompson asked irritably. 'Get on with it.'

Gigolo shook his head, stepping back. 'Can't do it,' he said.

'Why not?' Thompson barked.

'I told you not to believe his story,' Wren said. 'I'll throw him back in the cells-'

'No,' Thompson said sharply. 'Give him a chance.'

Tomalon stepped up behind Gigolo. 'What's the matter?' he asked quietly.

'I can't do it on purpose,' Gigolo replied. 'I think it only works

when I'm going to die otherwise.'

Tomalon sighed. 'Sorry,' he said, before kicking Gigolo through the hole.

Gigolo screamed all the way down, until the cord Tomalon had surreptitiously attached to his ankle stopped him. He spun around on the end of the rope like fish, shouting insults at Tomalon. Thompson walked to the edge and called down to Gigolo.

'Can you do it now?' he asked, smiling at Tomalon.

Motherfucker. Gigolo closed his eyes and pushed with his mind. He found that he'd taken control of the Blackheads immediately below him while falling, by instinct. How did I do it? Was it like...?

'Yes,' Gigolo called back. 'I'm controlling them.'

'Show me,' Thompson ordered. Gigolo sent a command, and the Blackheads under his control started to attack their fellows. 'Good. Now release them.'

Reluctantly, Gigolo allowed the Blackheads to slip from his control. As soon as they were no longer his, the other Blackheads stopped fighting them. Can they tell? How intelligent are they?

'You still with us?' Thompson called down.

'Yeah,' Gigolo shouted back, nervously eyeing the Blackheads beneath him. They seemed to be reacting to his presence, and looked like they were going to do that jumping attack they'd shown at the Maire Valley.

'We're going to pull you back up,' Thompson shouted. 'Hold on a moment.'

Gigolo was slowly winched back into the Vulture, still dangling by his foot. As he was pulled into the bay, the assembled Spartans started clapping. Thompson walked over to Gigolo and put a hand on his shoulder.

'I wasn't sure whether to believe your friend,' the old Spartan said, 'but it seems like you may be the Spartan we've been looking for. With you on our side, we may finally be able to turn this war around.' He raised a hand, quieting the other Spartans. 'I'd like to formally ask you to be my bodyguard, provided Wren doesn't mind.'

'Take him,' Wren said dismissively. 'I don't need the hassle.'

'Then welcome to the Builders,' Thompson said with a smile.

'Do I have a choice?' Gigolo asked.

'No,' Thompson replied, still smiling. 'Let's get practising, then. I don't want to have to push you out of a plane every time I need you to control some blackheads.'

Unlike Cressat, the clans of Nasces had no alliances and spent most of their time fighting each other. The city was a constant battlefield, unsafe for locals and outsiders alike. Despite this, the clans actually liked each other for the most part and on occasion set aside their differences and came together to do something important. Most felt that the threat from the North was something large enough to warrant one of these special occasions.

An Alliance talk had been called, and several of the larger southern clans invited, including the Builders. Nobody in the north liked the Builders very much, but it was felt that they were a necessary evil. Their huge resources would be helpful against the blackheads, it was said.

Midori and Lucas had been asked to do several important tasks for the smooth running of the event, but as per usual had decided to go and slack off.

'This one's loose,' Lucas said, rattling a skylight.

'Let me see,' Midori said. She gave it an experimental tug, and then kicked it hard. The skylight fell from its mountings in a shower of dust.

'Ah-ha!' Lucas exclaimed. 'A security weakness if I ever saw one. See, we are doing are jobs after all!'

Midori laughed and climbed through the hole she had made. The roof she emerged onto was sloped, so she carefully pulled herself up, being careful not to slip and fall to her death. That would be hard to explain to her supervisors.

She paused to let Lucas catch up, and then continued up onto the flat stretch at the very top of the building. The roof came to a plateau at the top, around the mast which extended some way further, blinking red and blue. There was just room for the two of them to sit side by side, their backs to the mast.

Lucas whistled. 'Nice view.'

Midori nodded. From the top of the Nasces alliance building- a protected building in the centre of the city- they could see all the way to Solidade, south of the solar straits, and over into the ghost peninsular. Only a handful of buildings in the city stood higher, and none so grand.

'You know,' Midori said, 'I think I've worked out how you can be so laid back about everything.'

'Oh yeah?' Lucas asked. 'Do tell.'

'Nothing really matters to you, does it? Nothing gets you worked up. You can be relaxed because there's nothing for you to be worried about.'

Lucas frowned, still staring into the distance. 'You think that, do you?'

'I'm not criticising you,' Midori said. 'I think it's a great way to look at life. If you never come to care about anyone, you never feel

bad for losing them.'

Lucas sighed softly. 'That's not how I feel at all,' he said. 'And it's not how I'd want you to feel, either.' He paused for a moment. 'If you don't care about anything, then what's the point of living? You'd just exist. Besides, you can't be happy without being sad.'

'But you're never sad.'

'I am,' Lucas said. 'I just don't let it get to me. I care about things, but I don't dwell on it when I lose them. I search for the next thing to care about.'

'That sounds hard to do.'

'When you lose a lot of people that you care for it becomes the only way to cope.' Lucas sighed again. 'You've got to get over Atlas at some point. Accept the good with the bad, come to terms with it, and move on. It's the best way.'

'I'm over him already,' Midori said. 'I've got you now. No grieving period.'

'Babe, I am the grieving period.'

'Don't- what are you, a psychologist?'

'Hey, you began the conversation.'

'Let's talk about something else then,' Midori said.

They sat in silence, staring at the world. Eventually, Midori pulled out her tablet and flicked through it.

'Looks like Elesa's respawned,' she said. 'Thank goodness.'

'Is she coming here?'

'She thinks so. She's asking if we've seen Gigolo; apparently she hasn't been able to get in touch with him.'

'Have you seen him?' Lucas asked. 'I haven't since we set off for the Maire valley.'

'I heard his falcon went down over the Mairin base,' Midori said uncertainly, 'But they all got out okay, so I guess he's fine. No idea where he is though.'

'I hope so,' Lucas said.

The pair lapsed into silence again, gazing out into the distance, but it was somehow a nicer silence.

20. Architects of Ruin (2)

the Builders. She gazed with some awe at the Vulture as it circled the building, searching for a suitable docking point. The aircraft was far too large to land anywhere near the building. Instead a tether was launched from beneath it, attaching to the edge of the building's landing pad. A ladder descended as soon as the Vulture stopped moving, and figures began to climb down.

Is that... What is Tomalon doing on Thompson's Vulture?

Vivian brought her Pelican down, landing near the Vulture. Quickly she shut everything off and hurried out to where the Vulture was tethered. Tomalon had already gone inside, so she followed the last of the Vulture's passengers into the building.

Tomalon was just inside, leaning against a wall, so she went to greet him. His face lit up when he saw her.

'You're safe!' he exclaimed, pulling her into a hug. 'I was worried that you might not have...'

'I'm fine,' Vivian said, pulling back. 'What happened after I died? All I've been able to find out is that we lost.'

Tomalon frowned. 'I'm not sure if I'm allowed to tell you everything,' he said uneasily. 'We didn't exactly lose, though. Most of the Mairin were evacuated safely, and we did a fair bit of damage to the Blackhead army. They've slowed down since we attacked, probably to let more reinforcements catch up.'

'So it was ultimately pointless, then?' Vivian asked. 'After all, aren't they just going to get all of their losses back?'

'Aren't we all going to die for good anyway?' Tomalon asked back. 'I don't see you killing yourself pre-emptively. We bought some time for ourselves. That might be the difference between winning and losing when they get to Nasces.'

Vivian sighed. 'Yeah. You're right.' She stood beside Tomalon and leant back, resting her head on his shoulder. 'So what was it you couldn't tell me?'

'I can't tell you,' Tomalon said, smiling, 'But look over there.' He pointed at where a group of Builders was standing. 'Recognize him?'

Vivian followed Tomalon's finger to the group of Builders milling around further into the building. All but one were outfitted in the standard Builder black and yellow. The last had armour coloured white and red, and a sword hanging from his hip.

'Gigolo?' Vivian asked. 'What's so special about him?'

'You'll see,' Tomalon replied.

The group of Builders began to wander away, leaving Gigolo standing awkwardly by himself. When he spotted Vivian and Tomalon he walked over, looking slightly nervous.

'Good to see you're okay,' Gigolo said.

'And you,' Vivian replied. 'Why were you with those Builders?'

Gigolo frowned. 'I don't know if I'm supposed to tell you,' he said quickly, glancing around. 'I think Thompson's going to make an announcement soon.'

'Okay,' Vivian said slowly. 'Are you still a part of my squad?'

'Not any more,' Tomalon said. 'Once Thompson decided he wanted Gigolo there was no stopping him. Sorry.'

'I didn't get a say in the matter,' Gigolo said bitterly. 'Anyway, I've got to go. And while I remember, could you tell Elesa that I'm here? I'm not allowed to send messages for the time being.'

'I'll let her know,' Vivian replied. 'Good luck with... whatever it is.'

'Thanks.' Gigolo turned and jogged away in the direction the Builders had gone.

'This is unexpected,' Vivian said. 'Who is this Thompson he spoke of?'

'The leader of the Builders,' Tomalon replied.

Ah.

'This is going to get a whole lot more complex, isn't it?'

'More than it already is, you mean.' Tomalon smiled wryly.

'Yeah.'

'You know how Zero disappeared,' Tomalon said suddenly. 'Do you know where he is?'

'No,' Vivian replied, frowning. 'Why do you ask?'

'I kind of feel guilty about being nasty to him at the restaurant the other day,' Tomalon said. 'What if he did something rash because of it?'

It wasn't you that made him upset.

'I don't think so,' Vivian said. 'He's always had a tendency for running away rather than facing up to things.'

'Still, I'd like to apologize,' Tomalon said. 'I'll put the word out, ask if anyone has seen him.'

'You do that,' Vivian said. In truth, she'd barely thought about Zero since he'd vanished. A small part of her even hoped he was gone for good. She didn't need him anymore- she had a chance to start anew in the Black Runners, with nobody to drag her down. She'd put the past behind her.

'Hey! Vivian!'

Oh, no.

Vivian turned to face the owner of the voice. June was stood before her, breathing heavily.

'Can I help you?' Vivian asked politely, wishing with all her might that June would just disappear.

'It's me, June,' June said. 'You must remember, right? We've met a few times.'

'I remember,' Vivian said. 'Was there something you needed?'

'Hey, you're Tomalon, aren't you?' June continued, ignoring Vivian. 'Leader of Vermillion.'

'Indeed I am, or was,' Tomalon said. 'You used to be the president of Aspertias, didn't you? Meier spoke of you often.'

'Really?'

'Never anything good, mind.'

'Oh.' June frowned. 'Doesn't surprise me. We never saw eye to eye.'

Vivian coughed loudly. 'Well, this is a lovely meeting but we really should get going-'

'Hold on a moment,' June said. 'I heard you talking about Zero. Do you know where he is?'

'Nope,' Vivian replied sharply, walking away. June grabbed her arm.

'Don't you care what happened to him? You spent nearly 30 years together!'

'Of course I care,' Vivian lied. 'But he's just attention seeking. He'll be back before long. Besides, why do you care?'

'Why shouldn't I care?' June asked.

Vivian was getting flustered. She didn't want to get into an argument with Tomalon watching, but June was being insufferable. _Screw you._

'I've really got to go now,' Vivian said firmly. She peeled June's hand off her arm and walked away, Tomalon in close tow.

'I don't think I've ever seen you so rude,' Tomalon said after they were a few corridors away. 'What brought that on?'

'Have you ever wanted to leave the past behind, and just start a new life?' Vivian asked. 'It's not easy when the past keeps trying to drag you back.' She continued walking, away from the memories of her life.

Zero considered himself something of an expert on cells, having spent a disproportionately large amount of his life in them. The one he had awoken in was good, not too dirty, with a flushing toilet and a mattress built into the wall. It was just a shame that he had no idea where he was, nor why he had been imprisoned.

To their credit, his captors came to see him soon after he awoke. The door swung open slowly and a Spartan edged in holding a rifle. Zero didn't recognize the markings, which probably meant that he'd been captured by one of the Solidade clans, for some indeterminable reason.

How wrong he was.

'I don't think we need that,' a voice said from out of Zero's sight. A voice Zero knew.

The Spartan withdrew, back into the hallway, and the door opened fully. Standing in the entrance to the cell was a Spartan Zero had really hoped never to see again. He stood tall, his face hard and sharp, and his gaze was like death.

'Marco?' Zero asked quietly. 'How are you-'

'You'd hoped I was dead, didn't you,' Marco said. He stepped into the cell, looking down at Zero. 'Sorry to disappoint you.'

'Then- Haru-'

'She's alive too, and just dying to see you,' Marco said, smiling. 'I was impressed; she came up with some very creative things to do to you.'

'Why am I here?' Zero asked, beginning to get scared.

'You were out in the town, drowning your sorrows for some reason or another. A simple matter to drug you and bring you here.'

'But why? What did I do to deserve this?'

'You pissed off my girl, Zero,' Marco said. 'You know how protective Haru and I are of each other.' His eyes glazed over momentarily. 'My, is that the time? I have a special event which I just can't miss.' He turned around and walked away. 'Don't worry. When we get back we'll have plenty of time for you.'

The cell door slammed shut, leaving Zero alone with his fears.

6

Elesa had hitched a ride into Nasces with a group of Black Runners headed for the alliance talks. Supposedly they were there as a group allied to the Builders, but Elesa suspected that the real reason was just as a show of power. The Black Runners were a strong clan, and closely tied to the Builders, to the extent that they seemed almost like a vassal clan at times. Elesa didn't know how she felt about that- while Alcor was nice, her run in with Thompson and Andreus earlier hadn't been too pleasant.

Nobody knew where Gigolo was, or even who he was, so Elesa spent an hour frustrated walking around the building before she chanced into meeting Tomalon. With a guilty look he directed her towards a room near the top of the building.

Alcor was waiting outside the room when she got there, staring into the distance with a thoughtful look.

'I was wondering if you'd come here,' Alcor said. 'Gigolo's inside, but you'd best wait here.'

'Why?' Elesa asked. 'Has he done something wrong?'

'Not exactly,' Alcor said. 'Did he tell you about his... skills?'

'Uh... skills? He's a good enough soldier, as far as I know.'

'No. Okay, I'll explain it to you. Gigolo has the ability to control Blackheads with his mind.'

Elesa stared at him for a moment. 'If you leave the punchline too long it gets stale,' she said eventually.

'I'm not joking,' Alcor replied. 'Gigolo has a power we've not seen before. It could be enough to defeat the blackheads for good, if used properly.'

'Right.' Elesa frowned. 'So why can't I see him?'

'Do you remember those Spartans you met earlier? The builders?'

'Yeah,' Elesa said with an unpleasant idea where this was going. 'The old guy and the sour one.'

'As good a description as any,' Alcor said, with a short laugh. 'Well, the old one has taken Gigolo under his wing.'

Elesa sighed with relief. 'So he hasn't done anything stupid? That's good. I can still see him, right?'

Alcor frowned. 'I'm not sure. It depends on Thompson. Sorry.'

The door to the ops room opened, and the sour faced Spartan stepped out. He regarded Elesa with an unimpressed look, and gestured to Alcor.

'Just follow me,' Alcor told Elesa. The pair walked into the ops room. Elesa saw Gigolo seated inside at the edge of the room, faced away from her. The old Spartan was talking excitedly to a group of officers in the centre. He stopped when he saw Alcor enter.

'Who is this?' he asked coldly, pointing at Elesa.

'This is Elesa,' Alcor said. 'She's the girl I told you about.'

'Elesa!' Gigolo shouted. He got up and walked over to her, pulling

her into a hug. 'They said you were alive, but that didn't stop me from worrying. I'm glad you're safe.'

'I'd say the same for you, but I'm not sure how safe you are right now,' Elesa replied. She glanced at Thompson, who was regarding her coolly.

'Is she now?' Thompson said slowly. 'That's... useful.' The way he said it sent shivers down Elesa's spine, but she wasn't going to let him scare her.

'What has Alcor told you about me?' she asked, keeping her voice firm.

'Nothing naughty, I assure you,' Thompson replied, a small smile playing over his face. He turned to Alcor and held a short whispered conversation before turning back.

'If you want to stay with Gigolo, then I welcome you onto my team. Gigolo can show you the ropes.'

Elesa felt as if something important had just passed her by. Was she a builder now? She didn't want that. How would she see Midori?

'I hope you know what happened better than I do,' Gigolo said as he took her hand and led her away.

'I'm afraid you're going to be disappointed,' Elesa replied. 'What do I have to do now?'

'Thompson's consolidating his power before he makes his move,' Gigolo said. 'When he needs us he'll tell us what to do. Until then, we've got some spare time.' Gigolo grinned at her, and in spite of everything that had happened, Elesa couldn't help but smile back.

7

While the main force of the Outside Context Problem was concentrated to the south, towards Nasces, it also periodically extended other forces to the west and north. The natural layout of the land made it difficult for the Blackheads to move their forces efficiently, as they were restricted by mountain passes and rivers cutting up the valleys. There were few easy routes for a land army to march westward, and only one major path northwards, stymieing its growth in those directions. Despite this, the OCP still extended its reach outwards, a base or pass at a time. Before long, it was reasoned, it would have grown too large to be defeated. There was nothing anyone in Nasces could do about it, of course, but that didn't stop them from trying to scout the OCP's movements.

'They're further west than I'd thought,' Midori said, making notes on a palmtop. 'The western clans aren't putting up much of a fight.'

'Alone, all they can do is defend,' Lucas said. 'It doesn't occur to them that in order to survive, they have to work together.' Lucas frowned. 'A relic of the Striker Wars. They were particularly violent down here.'

They're almost as stupid as you, then.

'I think we're on the leading edge,' Midori said, checking her palmtop. 'This is far as the Blackheads have reached.'

Lucas pulled the graph Midori had been helping to create up on his flight computer. It was a sobering sight- sightings of Blackheads extended almost as far as the Jurisan delta to the south, and were within spitting distance of the Jurisan clan itself.

'Jurisan are a major clan, aren't they?' Midori asked. 'They'll be able to hold out for a while, won't they?'

'Maybe,' Lucas replied. 'The sensible thing to do would be to evacuate to Nasces, where they can be some help.'

Of course you'd say to run, coward.

'You know,' Lucas began, 'We're not too far from Oaktier here. It's probably only a 5 hour flight, if that.'

'Oaktier?' Midori asked. 'That's the northern merchant city, right?'

'Yeah. It's the place where clans do their trade. Got a lot of merchant clans based there too.'

'Why are you bringing this up?' Midori asked.

Lucas sighed. 'I thought about what you said earlier, and I... would it help if you could see Atlas again?'

'What? No!' Midori said sharply. 'We're done. Finished. I'd be quite happy if I could live my life without ever seeing him again.'

'But you're not over him,' Lucas replied. 'I can see it.'

'I am!'

Lucas stopped the Pelican, and set the autopilot to hover. He got out of his seat and walked to Midori.

'I care about you, Midori,' He said. 'I want you to be happy, and until you make peace with Atlas that isn't going to happen.'

Midori nodded slowly, her eyes wet. 'What do you want me to do?'

Lucas got back into the pilots seat. 'Atlas went south with a pelican. He'd probably have been looking for work, and the easiest, safest jobs for a pilot are in transport and trade. So it's likely that he was headed for Oaktier.'

'So you're suggesting we go there and look for him?' Midori asked. 'Oaktier's huge, and there's no guarantee that he'll even be there.'

'These things have a way of working out,' Lucas replied. 'If we ask around we're bound to find him sooner or later.'

'And what about the Black Runners?' Midori asked. 'They're not just going to let us go AWOL.'

Lucas shrugged. 'I'm willing to bet that Wren has bigger things on her mind than catching two strays. We'll be fine.'

Midori sighed. 'Okay. Fine. We'll go and search for Atlas.'

'Glad to hear it.' Lucas swung the pelican around and began to fly south. It seemed there was hope for Midori yet.

8

The day of the Alliance talks had arrived. Aircraft came from all over Nasces, bringing with them an army of leaders, bodyguards and diplomats. Every clan in the city wanted to be represented in the discussions that could save or doom them. On the other side, representatives arrived from most of the major clans affiliated with the Builders, from Solidade, Cressat and beyond.

Organising the event was an unprecedented logistical challenge. Seating plans were drawn up, thrown away and then drawn up again. Clan rivalries complicated things immensely- the Blood Ravens, for example, had to be seated as far away from the Sand Men as possible to avoid conflict between them, while keeping both as close to the centre as their status required. Giving every clan a voice was downright impossible given the amount of time available and the number of clans attending, so certain clans from either side were chosen to be speakers for the rest.

The eyes of the world were turned to Nasces for the day. What transpired inside the auditorium would have far reaching consequences. The right outcome could save countless lives, but many more would be lost should no agreement be reached.

'Why do you need me there exactly?' Gigolo asked.

'We need to project our power,' Thompson said. 'If the northern clans fear us, it will make a treaty a lot easier to get.'

'And I help that how?'

'We've been leaking information about you,' Andreus replied. 'All of the clans know we now possess the ability to control Blackheads. You being there will add to the image of our strength.' He frowned, looking Gigolo up and down. 'It's a shame you don't look more imposing. Have you been slacking off on your training?'

Gigolo ground his teeth, but said nothing. He'd quickly learned that arguing with Andreus was useless. The heir to the builders was stubborn and arrogant, made worse by the fact that Thompson would always take his side. What a brat.

Thompson glanced at his watch. 'The rest of the clans should have arrived by now. It's time for us to enter.' With a roll of his shoulders he pushed the doors wide open and strode into the auditorium, making for the centre of the room. His seat was at the front, in the most important position. Andreus was sat on his left, with Gigolo to be sat just behind him. Wren took the spot on his right.

Thompson had been right on the mark. Almost all of the northern clans had arrived, bar the ones leading the discussions, as well as all of the clans supporting the builders. As they approached their seats, the remaining clans entered. Gigolo knew Thompson wouldn't be happy about that. He wanted to show that the alliance talks weren't important to him, to convince the northern clans to accept more restrictive terms.

Gigolo found his seat and sat down, conscious of all the eyes fixed on him. The southerners surrounding Thompson had all been briefed about him, but he could hear whispers from the other side and further away on his own side. That was what Thompson had wanted, right?

Thompson cleared his throat. 'I'd like to thank you all for coming here,' he began. 'I'm glad that we have such a good turnout.' He looked around the auditorium, taking everyone in his gaze, before continuing.

'You all know why you're here, so I'll get to the point. Nasces will fall if we don't do something. You, while strong, cannot survive if you do not work with each other and with us.'

One of the northern delegates raised his voice. 'I would beg to differ,' he said. 'We've come together against overwhelming odds before.'

'I assume you're referring to the Striker wars?' Thompson asked. 'True, but then you had the support of the rest of the north as well as Solidade. The north no longer exists in a state that can help you, and as for Solidade- well, that's the point of this whole discussion, isn't it?'

That's not going to go down well. Thompson had all but said that Solidade was under his control, something that the independent clans of Nasces wouldn't like. For years the Builder's influence on the central continent had lacked just two cities- Solidade and Oaktier. With the OCP, the builders had an excuse to move forces into Solidade, and had been taking the opportunity to consolidate their control over the city. Gigolo knew all this because Elesa had been forcing him to study the political landscape in preparation for suddenly becoming a part of it.

'I want to offer you an alliance,' Thompson continued. 'All of the clans of Nasces will be included, no matter how small or obscure. The Builders and all of their allies will help you defend your city and push back the blackheads. The eventual goal is of course to remove the Outside Context Problem from the world entirely.' Thompson paused momentarily.

'Now, I'm not doing this out of the goodness of my heart,' he continued. 'This doesn't benefit me in any real way, as if all I wanted to do was protect the central continent I'd just destroy the SolNas bridge. I ask for concessions from all of you in exchange for our assistance.'

'Here we go,' one delegate called. 'Our souls, is it?'

'I'd rather die than become your little bitch,' another

shouted.

'That can be arranged,' Andreus muttered quietly. Thompson shot him a warning look, then turned to address the auditorium.

'Firstly, you may not go to war with each other for the duration of this conflict or for 30 years following it,' he said. 'This is to be enforced by yourselves, or by southern force if necessary.'

The quiet grumbling from the other side of the room grew louder.

'War is our way of life,' the delegate who had spoken first said over the racket. 'We will not allow you to take it from us.' A chorus of approval sounded from the northern side of the room.

'Wait until you hear the rest of the terms before making a decision,' Thompson replied. 'Secondly, you must acquiesce to any requests made of you by the Builders or our allies, and follow our commands and strategies.' There were more complaints at that, though fewer than before. 'Finally, you will sign an exclusive trade agreement with Cressat and the Builders.'

Why would he ask for that? Gigolo thought for a moment. Where did Nasces get most of its supplies? Oaktier mainly, as well as Solidade and Daath. If they were unable to trade with Oaktier, then the small merchant city would probably collapse, which would mean that the builders had control over all of the cities on the central continent. With the Nasces clans dependent on the Builders for their resources, it wouldn't be much of a challenge for the Builders to take control of the city entirely. That would leave just Daath and the rest of the eastern cities independent.

Gigolo suddenly saw what Thompson was doing. Even in the face of such a terrible crisis, he was seeking to expand his empire. Regardless of whether the northern clans agreed or not- and they didn't have much of a choice- Thompson would come to control more of the world.

'You fucker!' Someone cried. 'You might have well have asked for our souls!'

'I will not agree to these terms,' the first delegate said. 'And I will not unless there is an actual difference between agreeing and allowing ourselves to die to the blackheads!'

Thompson nodded. 'You exaggerate a little there. I understand your concerns, but these are my terms. I will not change them.'

There was a outburst of noise from the other side of the room. The northerners began to argue amongst themselves and with the southern representatives. Thompson stood up and waved for his assistants to leave.

'We'll take a short break,' he said. 'You can think it over.'

As he left with Thompson, Gigolo realized that not one of the southern representatives had said a single word throughout the meeting. More evidence of the complete control that Thompson held over the south.

'Why give terms you know they will not agree to?' Gigolo asked once they were back in Thompson's chambers.

Andreus laughed. 'Only a fool gives agreeable terms to begin with,' he said.

Thompson nodded. 'The haggling shall commence, but I do not intend to compromise on the fundamental points.'

'But if they agree, they'll be shooting themselves in the foot for the future.'

Thompson smiled. 'I see you understand my intentions then,' he said. 'I'm surprised to hear you complain- as a Builder now, you stand to benefit.'

Gigolo sighed. I didn't ask for this. I don't want this. Why has this happened to me?

Andreus and Thompson began talking about the terms they had offered. Most of it was nonsense to Gigolo- trade and finance had never been of importance to him. In the isolated north, they weren't of importance to anybody. He tuned out of their conversation, wondering instead when he would see Elesa again.

A tickling at the back of his mind brought him back to reality. What was it? It seemed familiar, yet somehow different to anything he had felt before.

Blackheads. Gigolo looked around, trying to judge where they were. How can they be here?

Thompson noticed Gigolo looking around. 'Is something the matter?'

'I'm not sure,' Gigolo replied slowly. Above. But how? They can't be here yet.

'Spit it out,' Thompson said.

'I think... I think they're blackheads.'

Thompson frowned. 'That's not possible.'

Gigolo could sense them quite clearly now. There were only a few of them, perhaps 20, some distance above him, and getting closer. He reached out with his mind and tried to take control of them. To his shock, something stopped him. Is it... Could it be?

'They're above us, and coming closer,' Gigolo said urgently. 'We need to move.'

Thompson shared a glance with Andreus. 'I told you, that's not possible,' he said. 'The blackheads still haven't cleared the Maire valley.'

Gigolo looked upwards. They were close- right above him. No, not him. Thompson.

Without thinking Gigolo ran forward, tackling Thompson to the ground.

An instant later the ceiling collapsed, depositing a black Spartan into the centre of the room.

'Andreus!' Gigolo shouted. The ceiling above the other Spartan started to buckle. Andreus threw himself to the side as another blackhead fell through the ceiling where he had been standing. He rolled to his feet and drew a pistol, shooting the blackhead between the eyes.

Gigolo pulled himself to his feet and drew his own weapon, shooting the other blackhead while it tried to pull its sword out of the floor. Before he could breathe out, a dozen more dropped into the room. In panic, Gigolo reached out for them with his mind. What he found was something else entirely. A jumble of sensations passed through his mind- anger, determination, shock- before he broke through whatever had been defending the blackheads and took control of them.

'Don't shoot!' Gigolo cried as Andreus raised his weapon. 'They're mine.'

'Took you long enough,' Andreus said.

'Something was defending them,' Gigolo replied, looking questioningly at Thompson.

Thompson frowned. 'So there are others,' he said. 'I think I'll take your advice and move somewhere safer.' He walked to the door, giving the blackheads Gigolo controlled a suspicious look.

Gigolo concentrated on keeping the blackheads under his control. If he'd been able to take them from someone else, then it wasn't unthinkable that that person could do the same to him. How would he know if they tried?

There was a soft thud from behind him. Gigolo turned to see another blackhead drop through the ceiling above Thompson, sword pointed down. Before he could shout a warning, the sword pierced Thompson's back. The old Spartan stiffened suddenly, his face showing an almost comical expression of shock.

The blackhead collapsed with a bullet lodged in its skull, but the damage had been done. Thompson fell to his knees, his hands on the tip of the glowing sword that was lodged in his chest.

'Andreus...' he began, blood coming from his mouth. The younger Spartan ran to his side, taking his shoulders.

'What?' he asked desperately. 'What should I do?'

'Continue... as we planned.' Thompson smiled weakly. 'Finish what...' he coughed, splattering blood over Andreus's armour. '...what we started,' he finished.

'I shall,' Andreus said. 'I promise.'

Thompson died, the smile still on his face.

The doors burst open and a squad of Builders rushed in. The leader gave a shout of alarm when he saw Gigolo's blackheads and drew his weapon.

'Don't shoot them!' Andreus shouted urgently.

Either the squad leader didn't hear or didn't care. He opened fire with his rifle and shot the Blackheads down. Shaking slightly he went to Andreus.

'Is Thompson... is he dead?'

'He is,' Andreus replied. 'Which means that I'm now the one giving you orders.' He put his hands on the Spartan's shoulders and brought his knee up hard. There was a crunch, and the builder collapsed to the ground. 'Orders which you disobeyed. Get out of my sight.' The other squad members hurriedly picked up their leader and pulled him away.

Andreus turned away, disgust on his face. 'Useless morons,' he spat. He regarded Thompson's body with a critical eye, and then walked out of the room, beckoning for Gigolo to follow.

Elesa was stood outside, panting slightly. A sigh of relief escaped her lips as she saw Gigolo was unharmed. She gave him a quick embrace.

'I came straight here,' she said, glancing past Gigolo. 'Is Thompson...'

'He's dead,' Gigolo confirmed. 'Not that Andreus seems to mind.'

Andreus had walked on without them, barking orders at the Builder troops who were arriving. Seeing that Gigolo had stopped, he turned around.

'What are you standing around for?' he shouted. 'We need to find some Blackheads before these retards kill them.'

Gigolo hurried after Andreus, Elesa following close behind him.

Why would he- oh, no...-

'What are you planning to do with the Blackheads?' Gigolo asked, not sure he wanted to hear the answer.

'For revenge, of course,' Andreus said without glancing back. 'We can't let these Northerners get away with killing Thompson.'

'Which Northerners?' Gigolo asked.

'The backstabbing bastards we tried to negotiate with,' Andreus replied. 'I see now that there is only one sort of negotiation they listen to.'

'Actually, I don't think they were responsible,' Elesa said carefully. 'On my way over I saw them being attacked as well.'

'They were probably just a rogue element,' Gigolo added. 'I doubt that the clans of Nasces would be so stupid as to attempt to assassinate Thompson together.'

'When I want your advice, I'll ask for it,' Andreus snapped. 'For now, you're trying my patience. Shut up.'

Gigolo followed in silence. Why was Andreus so sure that the clans of Nasces were behind it? Did he know something?

Andreus led them straight to the area where the Nasces clans were based, picking up a few more Builders along the way. Gigolo soon realized where Andreus was leading them; the Auditorium, where a number of the Northern delegates had chosen to stay when the talks ended.

Inside, a group of delegates were huddled talking, their soldiers standing nervously around them. Corpses of Blackheads were scattered around, though there didn't seem to be any Spartan fatalities.

Andreus walked straight up to the first delegate he saw and grabbed him by the arm.

'What is the meaning of this?' he shouted. 'I thought you smarter than to try something like this!'

'I don't...' the delegate said desperately. 'What are you talking about?'

'You agreed to this meeting specifically to try and kill the Builder's leaders, didn't you?' Andreus shouted. 'You're nothing but a bunch of backstabbing swine!'

The other delegates and their guards had seen the commotion and began to walk hurriedly towards Andreus. The Builders arranged themselves in a line between them and Andreus; the two groups stared each other down for a moment.

'We're not responsible for the attack, Andreus,' one of the delegates said calmly. Gigolo recognized the man as the delegate who had spoken up frequently during the talks. 'We believe them to be the work of a rogue organization within the city, and are working on finding those responsible.'

'Bullshit,' Andreus said, taking his hand away from the other spartan. 'How on Earth would a rogue group have the ability to control blackheads like that? This has to be the work of a powerful alliance- yours.'

'Please don't jump to conclusions,' the delegate said quickly. 'As you can see, we were attacked as well.'

Andreus wasn't listening. 'If you think I'm just going to let you northern pricks get away with terrorism, you're wrong. From now on there can be no peace between the Builders and the clans of Nasces.' He turned and walked away, his guards following. Gigolo and Elesa stood still for a moment, not quite sure what had just happened.

'You're northerners, aren't you?' the delegate said to the pair. 'I'm Dean, second in command of the Serpents.'

'We're...' Gigolo couldn't think what to say. Was he still a northerner? His thoughts were interrupted by Andreus yelling at the pair of them to hurry up. With a last regretful glance at the Nasces Delegates, he walked away.

9

Even after seeing them at the Maire Valley, Vivian couldn't quite believe that anything so large as the Vultures could possibly fly. Every time she glanced at them from her cockpit she expected to see them falling from the sky, presumably due to physics having finally noticed their grievous transgression against gravity.

Regardless of their plausibility, their combat prowess was undeniable. In the tight spaces of the lower Maire valley their missile volleys were frighteningly effective, cutting down swathes of Blackheads. She and the other Sparrowhawk pilots had long since decided not to bother shooting at the blackheads; next to the Vultures their contributions looked minuscule, barely worth the bullets they expended. Vivian wasn't entirely sure why they were even there in the first place; the mission briefing she'd been given simply said that they were to try and defend the Vultures against any possible attack from another clan.

'Did you hear?' Tomalon asked from the seat behind hers. 'Lucas and Midori's pelican disappeared.'

'Were they attacked?' Vivian asked, concerned. She'd already had one squad member vanish; many more and there wouldn't be a squad left to speak of.

'Doesn't seem like it,' Tomalon said. 'They were supposed to be out scouting the western edge of the continent. No Blackheads out there.'

'So they've gone AWOL?' Vivian sighed. Now that Gigolo and Elesa no longer had to answer to her- she wasn't even sure if she'd outranked them in the first place since nobody had bothered to give them proper ranks- it was just her and Tomalon left. Their little group of survivors was getting split up further.

'That would seem to be the case,' Tomalon said, sounding distracted. 'Uh... you'll want to hear this.'

'What?' Vivian asked, certain she wasn't going to like what she was about to hear.

'The talks in Nasces were attacked by Blackheads,' Tomalon said. 'Thompson is dead, as are a number of important clan leaders.'

'Blackheads?' Vivian asked, surprised. 'How?'

'The message doesn't say specifically,' Tomalon replied, 'But I'd guess Gigolo's skill isn't as unique as we'd thought. But that's not the most disturbing part. Andreus is blaming the attack on the Nasces clans. He's declared war on them all.'

Vivian saw the Vultures begin to pull up and turn around. A message flashed up in her HUD; an order to turn and head back to Solidade.

'Looks like we're being recalled,' she said. 'I can't imagine what for.'

'That doesn't make any sense,' Tomalon muttered. 'Even if the Nasces clans ordered the assassination- and I doubt that any of the ones in the discussions did- it's very unlikely that all of them were involved in it at once. So what is Andreus doing?'

'But isn't he a bit of a psycho?' Vivian asked, pulling up and following the rest of the squadron. 'I've heard that he's got quite the temper.'

'Yeah, but he's not an idiot- Thompson wouldn't designate a moron as his heir, or even someone who lets anger cloud their judgment so much.'

'So what, you're saying that there's something else happening here?'

'I don't know,' Tomalon said, sighing. 'It just seems weird.'

'What doesn't?' Vivian asked emptily.

10

The Northern and Central continents were separated by the Solar straits, a channel of water that ran along the more or less completely east-west divide. They were at their thinnest between the twin cities of Nasces and Solidade, connected by the 12 mile long SolNas bridge, and widened out into the ocean to the east. To the west they opened up into the Tepid Sea where both continents shrunk away from each other like out of phase sine waves, before closing in again near the free merchant city of Oaktier, the last independent city on the central continent.

'It looks no different to Solidade or Nasces,' Midori complained as it came into view. 'If anything, it looks like even more of a shithole.'

'That's because you're just seeing the docks,' Lucas said, pulling the pelican up out of range of the anti air defenses on the coast. 'They're larger than any others.'

'So the rest of the city is nicer?'

'I'm not sure there is much else,' Lucas admitted. 'I've never been here before, but supposedly the docks make up a good two thirds of the area. Shipping is their biggest industry, though.'

'Exciting,' Midori said, rolling her eyes. 'So what's the plan?'

'We'll find a place to stash the Pelican and head to a pub,' Lucas said. 'There will be people we can ask about finding Atlas all over.'

Lucas landed the pelican inland, on top of a deserted building that looked ready to collapse. The pair of them walked into the city then took a cab to the nearest bar, The Profit Margin. The bar was at the top of a corporate building, and supposedly a hot spot for backroom deals and shady business. Lucas and Midori found a table in the corner and sat down.

'What now?' Midori asked, craning her neck to look around the bar.
'How does this help us at all?'

'Just wait,' Lucas said. 'There are certain rules of etiquette to deal with. Someone should contact us shortly.' He put an arm on Midori's shoulder. 'And let me do the talking.'

In the end they had to wait almost an hour before a man walked up to their table and took a seat. He fixed Lucas with a piercing stare.

'How can I help you?' he asked, his voice hard.

'We're looking for someone,' Lucas said. The man nodded and reached into his bag, pulling out a laptop.

'I'll need details, anything that could identify him,' he said. 'My fee is 25000C, non negotiable, with extra if the job takes more than a week. Is that acceptable?'

Midori hissed when the broker named his price. Lucas just nodded. 25000C was a lot of money, as much as most Spartans could hope to earn in a year. Both he and Midori had a substantial amount of credit saved up, but he'd been hoping to use it for other things. They didn't have much of a choice though, as there were very few information brokers in Oaktier willing to work for outsiders.

'That will be fine,' Lucas said. 'We're looking for a man named Atlas. Midori?'

'He's 34 years old, about 5'11, with blonde hair and brown eyes,' she began. 'He's got a small scar on his left arm and a circular birthmark on his right leg.' She and Lucas had gone through all of his defining features; anything that could identify a Spartan from the crowd.

'Clan?' The broker asked, typing on his laptop.

'We don't know,' Midori replied. 'He used to be in Aspertias, and I think before that he was in Knossos. He left Aspertias just under a week ago when it fell to the blackheads.'

The broker nodded. 'Armor? Any particular weapon choices?'

'His armor was white and blue, full pilot set. He used a DMR and plasma pistol.'

'Where was he headed last time you saw him?'

'South from Aspertias,' Midori replied. 'He had an unmarked Pelican with him.'

'He was probably searching for work,' Lucas added. 'He might have gone for a courier job, for example.'

The broker nodded and folded away his laptop. 'My fee?' He asked. Lucas silently transferred the money and the broker stood up. 'We should have the information you seek within a week. Come and find us then.' Without another word he left, vanishing into the crowd.

'He was pleasant,' Midori said with a grimace. 'Do you think he's likely to find us the information?'

'Probably,' Lucas replied. 'These people are professionals- they know what they're doing. He's unlikely to double cross us either, since most of them live off their reputations.'

Midori nodded. 'So what are we going to do for a week? Can we stay in Oaktier?'

'Maybe,' Lucas said. 'First we need to-' Seeing a Builder walking confidently towards their table he cut off abruptly.

'Are you members of the Black Runners?' The Builder asked, stopping next to Lucas.

'Yeah,' Lucas said warily. 'Can we help you?'

'As a matter of fact you can,' The Builder replied. 'Come with me.' She turned and walked a few paces away, then turned back when Lucas and Midori didn't follow her. 'Is there a problem?'

Lucas looked into Midori's eyes, seeing her confusion and surprise mirroring his own. Neither of them were used to being ordered around by a total stranger. Still, the Black Runners are all but a vassal clan of the Builders nowadays... Lucas stood up.

'Let's go.' He held out his hand to Midori and she followed him after the Builder.

She led them impatiently out of the pub and down into the city.

'I won't ask what you're doing here,' she said when they'd been walking for a while. 'But you should tell whoever sent you to brush up their security; it was trivial to track your pelican.'

'Uh, sure,' Lucas said. 'Thanks.' The Builder gave him an playful smile. Lucas really hoped she'd stay silent. He knew nothing of internal Builder politics, and it seemed she'd assumed he was a part of them. Though, she could tell us something useful.

The Builder led Lucas and Midori at a jog towards the coastline and into the port district, eventually arriving at a large warehouse on the coast, next to the massive port. The Builder unlocked the door and led them into a dark, cavernous space. Lucas followed her as she walked confidently towards a shadowed shape in the center of the warehouse; as his eyes adjusted to the gloom he saw that it was a Pelican in the early stages of loading, with piles of crates stacked around.

'You need us to lift those for you?' Lucas asked, a little put off.

'Not physically,' the Builder said with a laugh. 'There's supposed to be two shipments here, but I can't fit them both into my bird. You don't mind transporting some of these to Daath, do you?' She gave them both a meaningful look, continuing, 'It didn't look like you were doing anything important...'

Lucas sighed, shrugging. 'Yeah, that's fine,' he said, figuring that it was safest to just go along with the Builder's plan.

'I thought you'd agree,' the Builder responded. 'Load up the ones marked with BEA-COM first; we'll ferry those out to your pelican and then you can take them on to Daath.'

'Lucas?' Midori asked hesitantly. She gestured around her, confusion on her face. 'Weren't we...?'

Lucas walked over and took her hand. 'Just play along for now,' he whispered. 'We'll get back to our mission soon enough. Besides, haven't you always wanted to see Daath?'

Midori nodded glumly, and the pair walked over to the pile of crates. Lucas took hold of a small one and picked it up, immediately surprised by its weight. 'These are bloody heavy,' he said, struggling to push it into the Builder's pelican. 'What's in them, rocks?'

'A good guess,' the Builder replied. 'But they're much more valuable than that.'

'Must be golden rocks then,' Midori muttered loudly, heaving one of the smaller crates into the Pelican. The Builder laughed.

'These are core components,' she said. 'An upgrade for our friends in the Citadel.'

'And those?' Lucas asked, nodding to the crates the Builder was stacking next to the Pelican.

'It's some new weapon we're working on,' the Builder replied. 'They call it the Harpoon; it's being fitted onto the Anchor within the next week.' The Builder pointed upwards. 'Powerful stuff, or so I'm told- supposedly when it's installed it will be able to flatten a huge area of Blackheads.'

Lucas nodded as if he knew what was going on. The Builder seemed to assume he knew what any of these things were- the Anchor, or these Harpoons- and asking might make her suspicious of them. For once he was soundly out of his depth, and resolved to keep his mouth shut and just play along.

11

Despite having been fighting them for several weeks now, the Spartan clans knew very little about the Blackheads- where they came from, why they were attacking, or even anything about their physiology- it was assumed that they were the same as Spartans, but since their bodies evaporated within an hour of death, nobody really knew. One of the few things that the Spartans did know was their running speed- they could average 15 kph almost indefinitely, and had been seen to

reach almost 40 kph when sprinting- faster than the average Spartan could run for any long period of time. With the Maire valley barely 2000 kilometers north of Nasces, there had been but one calculation on everyone's minds for the past few days.

'Unbelievable,' Andreus breathed as the Blackhead horde came into sight of the Vulture. 'It's massive. They truly are a force of Nature.'

Who the hell is he even speaking to? Elesa looked around the Vulture's cockpit. The nervous looking pilot was the only other occupant barring herself and Gigolo, and Andreus had made it quite clear on several occasions that he didn't expect either of them to keep up with his 'Intellectual mutterings.' She ached to thump the little brat- since Thompson's death he'd become insufferable, insulting everyone around him and acting like he knew everything.

'I have to hand it to those Northern swine,' the Builder continued. 'I'd probably not have thought of capturing Blackheads to use as a weapon.'

'Is that what we're here for?' Gigolo asked suspiciously. 'I've told you before- I'm not going to use my power to kill people.'

'We need them for defense,' Andreus replied unconvincingly. 'A disaster like yesterday cannot happen again. The only way to prevent those Northern terrorists from attacking us is to be able to retaliate on a larger scale than them.'

Elesa snorted quietly. Bullshit. It was clear what Andreus intended to do with them. Given Andreus's apparent lack of concern when Gigolo had stated his refusal to use Blackheads against any other Spartan, he probably had other ways of using them to his own ends.

'We're over the Blackhead's front line, sir,' the pilot said nervously.

'Keep us just ahead of them,' Andreus ordered. 'And keep the Vulture steady- if you mess this operation up, I will personally see you thrown straight into that horde.'

'Yes sir,' the pilot replied quickly.

Andreus pointed at Gigolo. 'Come with me,' he ordered, walking out of the cockpit. Gigolo and Elesa followed him through the bowels of the huge aircraft, into the open bomb bay at its base. The bay had been expanded, and sections cut away in the hull to allow it to hold a huge container.

'How many do you need?' Gigolo asked, looking at the container with dread.

'As many as you can control,' Andreus answered. 'Can you reach the blackheads from here?'

Gigolo opened his mind, his third eye seeing through the ghostly walls of the Vulture and out into the world. The Blackheads below him stood out clearly, their simple minds ready to be taken. Tentatively he reached out, forcing his will upon them. A few responded, but they were sluggish, and not nearly as many as he knew he could

manage.

'Not quite,' Gigolo said. 'We need to get closer.'

'We're not going any further down,' Andreus said firmly. 'You'll have to ride down with the container.'

'Fuck that,' Gigolo replied. 'I can't control the entire horde; they'll kill me for sure!'

'You managed earlier.'

'I was a good 20 feet above them then, not 2,' Gigolo said. 'It's not happening.'

Andreus sighed. 'We'll attach you to the chain a few meters up from the container. Is that sufficient?'

It wasn't, but the look on Andreus's face convinced Gigolo that declining was not a safe answer. He nodded silently.

A minute later he was clinging for dear life as the container was lowered slowly from the belly of the Vulture. Making sure his actual eyes were facing directly upwards, Gigolo reached out with his mind and took control of the Blackheads directly beneath him, guiding them away as the container hit the ground with a thud. Slowly he maneuvered them into the crate- no easy task with the constant flow of Blackheads running southwards. None of them seemed interested in him, but just to be safe he reached out and checked the minds of a few of those he didn't control, and noticed something strange.

When he'd taken control of the Blackheads at Nasces, he'd been ripping them away from the control of somebody else; a strange sensation that almost allowed him to feel the mind of the other Blackhead controller. Now as he reached gently into the minds of the passing horde, he felt the faintest touch of something similar- a huge, yet somehow tiny mind, slowly and weakly enforcing its own will upon the blackheads. Gigolo checked more, and found that now that he knew what to look for, each Blackhead had traces of that same mind hidden within it.

It didn't take a genius to work out what he was feeling.

With rather more nerves than he'd been feeling before, Gigolo moved as many Blackheads as he dared into the container and made the signal to be lifted away.

Back inside the Vulture, he stopped Andreus as the Builder inspected his new weapons with awe.

'I think I felt something down there,' Gigolo said.

'Uh huh?' Andreus muttered, disinterested.

'It was like another mind was controlling the blackheads,' Gigolo continued. 'Like some sort of controlling consciousness, or something.'

Andreus turned to him, a hard look in his eyes.

'You must be mistaken,' he said firmly. 'The Blackheads are just animals. They have no minds, no intelligence; you felt nothing.'

22. Architects of Ruin (4)

12

Zero came to slowly, a metallic taste in his mouth and a thudding in his forehead. It hurt to think, but he tried anyway, picking his memory back up piece by piece. A memory of pain. Slowly he opened his eyes, squinting in the harsh light.

Haru was stood in front of him, her face twisted into a smile. 'I see Marco was kind enough to soften you up for me,' she drawled, producing a sharp instrument in her hands. 'Would you remind me to thank him later?'

13

Gigolo remembered his surprise and wonder at seeing a Vulture for the first time at the Maire Valley. It had seemed impossible that such a huge machine could hang so effortlessly in the sky, and deal such colossal destruction. Having now flown in one, the feeling of wonder was somewhat abated, but he was still impressed to see how many now loitered in the skies just south of Nasces.

'They're not going to know what hit them,' Andreus muttered behind him, studying a projection of Nasces.

Gigolo took a close look at the projection. Arrayed along the southern edge were the Builder forces, which consisted of half a dozen vultures, nearly two thousand Sparrowhawks and Falcons, and tens of thousands of infantry and armored units. Arrayed against them were the combined forces of Nasces- a pathetic display, with barely a hundred aircraft between them, and only a few thousand ground troops. It was a far smaller force than they'd expected to see. Nasces was beset by internal fighting, and the forces directly opposing the Builders came from a mere handful of clans. The vast majority seemed unaware of the southern army rapidly approaching.

'Begin the attack,' Andreus ordered, his generals repeating the order to their own subordinates. The projection began to update as the ground forces began their advance; some up the SolNas bridge, some from the plains to the west of the city. The Vulture's engines started to throb louder as the aircraft accelerated forward, its escorts leading ahead.

Andreus's plan, as far as Gigolo had been told, seemed to be to simply crush the resistance as quickly and violently as possible. He intends to break them, Elesa had observed when she'd heard the plan. Gigolo's own role was fairly minor until after the main battle was done. He was just along for the ride; and so that Andreus could keep a close eye on him. Gigolo didn't plan to betray the Builders, but that didn't mean he liked what he was doing. If Andreus orders me to kill someone, I'll refuse.

The Vulture squadron approached the edge of Nasces slowly while the smaller aircraft flew ahead, seeking out anti aircraft defenses and

destroying them. A few heavier installations held their own against the Sparrowhawks and Falcons for a while, but were blown into oblivion when the Vultures got close enough to use their missile volleys. On the ground, the invading troops met with little resistance. Most of the clans seemed content to ignore the Builders, while overwhelming numbers and firepower forced the allied troops to fall back deeper into the city. On the projection the objective of the assault was clearly visible; both prongs were aimed clearly at the alliance building near the center of the city, where the defenses were the greatest and the Nasces clans were headquartered.

_It's too easy, Gigolo realized suddenly. Surely the Nasces clans, so fiercely independent, wouldn't show such indifference to foreign troops barging into their city. What on earth were they planning?

For almost an hour the Vultures crawled closer to their target. Andreus was plainly unwilling to put his largest and most expensive assets in danger, using them merely to take out armored targets from a distance while the lighter aircraft dealt with the rest. His own Vulture- the one he and Gigolo were in- was at the back of the formation, furthest from danger. It didn't fire its weapons once.

Inevitably, the smaller forces of the Northern clans were pushed back until they were fighting up against their headquarters. A vicious battle took place in the streets around the center as the Northern forces started fighting in earnest, having nowhere left to retreat.

'That was straightforward,' Andreus said with a smile. 'Beat them around a little more, then inform them we're ready to accept their unconditional surrender.' He gestured to the pilot. 'Pull us all up. Show them the might of the Builders.' Slowly the huge aircraft rose in formation, spreading out to ring the alliance building.

'They're hailing us,' the pilot reported. 'Patching them through.'

'Andreus, I presume?' a calm voice spoke. 'Your show of might is very impressive.'

'I accept your compliment,' Andreus replied, a smile on his lips. 'Are you ready to surrender now, or shall I demolish your headquarters first?'

'You may try,' came the response. 'But I'm afraid you've been most despicably deceived.'

Right on cue, the map of the city changed. Where before there had been just the grey markings of neutral forces, now appeared countless swarms of red, moving inwards behind the Builder army.

'Our rear guard is being engaged!' a general shouted. 'They're getting overwhelmed!'

Andreus froze, astonished. 'That can't be possible!' he said. 'We've got them all penned in!'

'It's the clans who ignored us,' Gigolo said. 'They were setting up

an ambush.' He grimaced, looking at the tactical map. 'I'm no strategist, but it can't be good to see so much red.'

'You bastard!' Andreus howled. 'You scheming scumbag. This isn't playing fair!'

'Neither is what you're doing, my good man,' the anonymous voice replied. 'Oh, and I nearly forgot- we've prepared a special surprise for you and your precious Vultures.'

A moment later there came a colossal thud, and one of the Vultures simply disappeared in a ball of flame, debris arcing out over the city. Andreus's vulture rocked alarmingly in the shockwave, dropping some distance before the pilot could get it back under control.

'The fuck... was that an Onager?' Andreus got to his feet and rushed to the pilot's seat. Gigolo followed, tracing back the white line from the dissipating fireball down into the city. At the end was the largest cannon he had ever seen, swinging slowly to target another Vulture.

'Get us down!' Andreus yelled to the pilot. 'Down between the buildings, quickly!' Gigolo could see the other Vultures also dropping quickly into the safety of the streets, where the Onager couldn't target them as easily. He could also see that they weren't moving nearly fast enough- as he watched a second Vulture blew apart under the Onager's fire. The massive cannon continued to swing slowly, tracking a third target.

'Where were they hiding that thing?' Andreus shouted.

'It was inside one of the clan bases,' came the response from one of the generals. 'We didn't spot it because it was hidden behind a canopy.'

'All Vultures, fire all missiles at that Onager,' Andreus ordered as the surviving aircraft dropped into momentary safety. A volley of missiles spat out from the 3 remaining Vultures, arcing through the sky towards the huge mass driver. Most exploded harmlessly in mid air- somehow the Nasces clans had obtained a shield generator for it as well- but a few made it through as the shield failed and impacted the Onager. When the smoke cleared the cannon had been destroyed.

'Order a general retreat,' Andreus said angrily. 'Pull everyone back to the sea.' He shook his head. 'When I get my hands on those Northerners...' he muttered darkly.

Although, despite the tremendous loss the Builder had just suffered, Gigolo noticed the briefest hint of a satisfied smile on his face.

14

Vivian and Tomalon watched the catastrophe unfold from the seats of their pelican, high above the city of Nasces. Neither quite knew what to make of the scenes of destruction below, as the cornered southern force was thoroughly ruined by the allied clans.

'Andreus is an idiot, isn't he?' Vivian mused. 'He led his army into

such an obvious trap.'

'Why are we fighting for him?' Tomalon asked. 'How did we come to ally ourselves to the southerners, against other northerners?'

Vivian shrugged. 'Fate, I guess.'

'Then what's keeping us here?'

'The rest of our squad is here.'

'What squad?' Tomalon asked. 'Midori, Lucas and Zero left. Gigolo and Elesa don't need our help.'

Vivian sighed. 'So where would we go instead?'

Tomalon smiled. 'You remember Vernon, don't you?'

15

The routed Builder army had fallen back to the Solar Straits, where they dug in and prepared to defend. Though powerful, the combined Nasces forces were not quite strong enough to force the southerners out of their city, and so a stalemate set in while the Builders waited for reinforcements from Solidade and Cressat. It was a stalemate that everyone knew could not last forever. The approaching Blackhead horde would see to that.

Gigolo and Elesa had been told rather forcefully that they weren't needed for a while and so had wandered off together, glad for the rest time.

'How exactly did we end up fighting for that asshole?' Elesa asked.
'I don't remember agreeing to help Andreus.'

'Thompson was a rather forceful spartan,' Gigolo said. 'I didn't exactly like him, but at least he seemed like he could save the north. Andreus, on the other hand...'

'He's incompetent and a dick,' Elesa finished. 'I don't think he's going to help us save Nasces. He seems more interested in wiping it off the face of the planet.'

Gigolo sighed. 'I'm sorry I got us into this mess. If it weren't for this stupid ability I have, we'd-'

'You'd be dead,' Elesa said. 'And I don't mind. At least life around you is never boring.'

Gigolo nodded. 'That's one thing you can say for it, I suppose.'

They were silent for a few minutes, enjoying the peace and each others company.

'What do you want to do?' Gigolo asked.

'I want to save this city,' Elesa replied.

'Is staying with the Builders the best way to go about that?'

'Where else can you use your powers to such an effect?'

Gigolo frowned. 'So you think we should stay?'

'Sorry, that came out wrong. I mean, is there any other clan that provides the support you need to be able to help Nasces as much as you can here?'

'I don't know that my power will help Nasces much here,' Gigolo said.
'I'm sure Andreus intends to make me execute people.'

'If he does, will you do it?'

Gigolo grimaced. How can I take the life of another? If doing it would help save many more, then perhaps I could justify it. But would working for Andreus really benefit anyone?

'I don't know,' he said. 'I hope I never have to find out.'

With it's usual excellent timing, Gigolo's communicator started to ring. He answered it with a sigh.

'Andreus requests your presence in the command building,' came the message. The caller hung up before Gigolo had a chance to respond. Sighing some more, he stood and put his helmet back on.

'I'm needed,' he said. 'I'm sorry.'

'Don't be,' Elesa replied, also standing. 'Let's see what our lord and master desires of us, shall we?'

The pair walked back into the camp, making their way to the tall building Andreus had requisitioned as a command post. The Builders had taken over most of the docks area in the south of the city, and were using it to unload supplies and more troops; but despite the amassing army the cavernous warehouses still seemed empty. In more peaceful times they would have been full of wares and resources to be sold in the bustling markets, or taken further north to supply the clans. With the Builders occupying the southern section of the city, most of the trade had dried up.

Andreus awaited them inside the command building, along with his senior aides and clan leaders. Wren stood beside him, her expression harsh; next to her was Samael, who looked slightly guilty.

Tied to a chair in the center of the room were two Spartans Gigolo vaguely recognized; he placed them as being members of the Nasces clans involved with the Alliance talks the previous day. Both were almost naked and looked to have been beaten.

'Summon your Blackheads,' Andreus ordered immediately.

Gigolo stopped dead. 'Why?' he asked nervously.

'To threaten these two,' Andreus replied. 'They've been rather uncommunicative.'

Gigolo glanced at Elesa, who shook her head, then Samael and Wren,

who looked away.

'Do it!' Andreus shouted suddenly. 'Don't make me lose my patience again!'

With a sick feeling Gigolo reached out with his mind and touched the Blackheads he'd left inside one of the warehouses. He'd found a way to put them in a passive state so that they didn't need constant watching- a lucky discovery, since he hadn't been sure how exactly he'd be able to sleep while controlling them. Gigolo activated them, and ordered them to make their way to him. In a few moments they were running up the stairs, coming to rest behind him.

'Do you see that?' Andreus asked the pair of prisoners, walking to them and pointing their heads at the Blackheads. 'I have the power to kill you permanently if I so desire.' The prisoners eyes focused slowly on the crowd of Blackheads and the color drained from her face. The second prisoner began to whimper softly.

'I've told you all I know,' the first prisoner said. 'Please, there's nothing else I know.'

'You're a clan leader,' Andreus snapped. 'You must have known of the Alliance's battle plans.'

'I swear, I know nothing more than I've told you-'

Andreus slapped her hard. His armored hand made a wreck of the prisoner's face, breaking her nose and knocking teeth out of her mouth. She retched blood, spitting more teeth out.

'I... don't know... anything,' she repeated slowly, struggling to speak.

Andreus stepped back, looking at his prisoner with disgust.

'I think I know a way to jog your memory,' he said. 'Kill the other one, Gigolo.'

Gigolo froze._ This isn't- he can't-_

'What are you waiting for?' Andreus screamed. 'Kill him!'

Gigolo shook his head. 'I can't,' he said quietly. 'I won't. It's not right.'

'You'll do as I say,' Andreus replied in a menacing whisper, 'or I'll kill your bitch.'

Gigolo saw Elesa stiffen, and her hand went to the rifle on her back. He caught her arm, and shook his head. Her eyes met his, and an understanding passed between them. She relaxed slightly.

'Very well,' Gigolo said. He stepped forward, bring one of his tame Blackheads with him. The Blackhead raised its sword and walked to the second prisoner.

The room was silent as the Blackhead raised its sword. Gigolo closed his eyes, sent another command, and then broke into a run.

All of the Blackheads in the room drew their swords and began to attack the Builders. Two charged directly at Andreus, swords rushing to meet his chest. The Builder dived out of the way, his pistol already in his hand, and began firing.

'Kill him! Kill that traitor, damn you!' he screamed.

The Blackheads had surprise on their sides, and use it to great effect, cutting down Andreus's aides and guards with wide swings of their swords. Gigolo watched it all in his mind, knowing that it was only temporary- he'd had barely a dozen blackheads to work with. As the Builders worked out what was happening and managed to draw their own weapons, the tide of the fight turned. The fragile Blackheads were gunned down as quickly as the Spartans they had just killed. But Gigolo hadn't wanted to kill all of the Spartans in the room. He'd just needed a diversion. By the time anyone understood what was happening, he and Elesa were already out of the command center and tearing away from the Builder base, shouting about a northern attack to confuse anyone nearby.

But one face was etched into Gigolo's mind. The face of Samael, as one of Gigolo's blackheads drove its sword into his chest.

23. Those who Fight Further (1)

Those Who Fight Further

The abandoned factory provided a perfect hiding place from which to observe the chaos engulfing the city of Nasces. From the roof Elesa could see quite some distance; with her sniper's scope she was able to work out what was happening in the base they had just fled despite the falling darkness.

Gigolo had struck a powerful (if unintentional) blow to the Builders by killing almost half of their high command in Nasces. The short battle had thrown the Southern forces into chaos. Already on the back foot, they were having difficulty repelling the Allied assault.

Elesa heard quiet footsteps behind her.

'I killed a lot of Spartans,' Gigolo said quietly.

'They would have killed us,' Elesa replied. 'You did the right thing.'

'No,' Gigolo said. 'I should have found another way. I shouldn't have to kill anyone!'

'Sometimes you've got to do the wrong thing so that everything works out in the end.'

'I killed Samael,' Gigolo continued, as if he hadn't heard. 'Even after he was so kind to us, and took us in- I cut him down without a moment's hesitation.'

'It wasn't you.'

'But it was!' Elesa heard a crash behind her as Gigolo kicked a wall.

She still didn't turn around. 'When I'm controlling a Blackhead I can see what it does, feel what it does. It doesn't matter that it wasn't my hand that killed him- I still felt it.'

Elesa sighed. 'But you have to go on. You have to come to terms with what you've done, accept it, make it a part of you. And then you have to prove that ultimately your actions were for the best.'

Gigolo was silent for a long time. 'I'm sorry,' he said eventually. 'We've got more important things to deal with than my guilt.'

'Will you be able to handle it?'

'I think so.' Gigolo was silent again, and Elesa returned her attention to the battle taking place.

'How's it going?' Gigolo asked after a few minutes, settling down beside Elesa.

'Looks like the Allies are going to win,' Elesa said.

'Win this fight, you mean,' Gigolo corrected her.

'What you said.' Elesa took another look at the battle. The Nasces Alliance were pushing hard to dislodge the Builders from their position in the dockyards. It was a desperate move- though they had the resources of a city behind them, the Builders had the power of an entire continent at their disposal. In the long term they couldn't hope to win. But then, that probably wasn't their intention.

'They're going after the bridge,' Elesa continued. 'I think they plan to abandon the city.'

'So they're not even going to fight the OCP?'

Elesa shrugged. 'They'd lose alone.'

'But if the OCP takes Nasces-'

'We're all fucked.' Elesa shook her head. 'You think the Alliance is thinking that far ahead?'

Gigolo scowled. 'There's got to be something we can do. We can't just sit here and wait for the Blackheads to arrive!'

'So what do you expect us to do?' Elesa asked. 'What can the pair of us hope to accomplish?'

'I don't know,' Gigolo replied, frustrated. 'I just know that we have to do something.'

Elesa smiled inside her helmet. Oh, how different he is now. When did he become so noble?

'First, we need to get out of Nasces,' Elesa said. 'We can decide where to go from there.'

'I guess the SolNas bridge is out. The Builders have it locked down for now, and I doubt the Alliance would let us cross if they realized

who we were.'

'So we find an aircraft,' Elesa said.

'And a pilot,' Gigolo added. 'Unless you've learned how to fly in the past day.' He sighed. 'This is like Aspertias all over again.'

'I think you're forgetting someone.' Elesa smiled. 'Lucas is a pilot.'

'Is he still in Nasces? Can we contact him?'

'Midori sent me a message a while back. They're in Oaktier, but I think they accomplished what they were intending to do there.'

'That's where they went? What were they doing there?'

'I'm not sure,' Elesa said, looking uncomfortable. 'Midori wouldn't tell me.'

'Huh,' Gigolo frowned. 'Okay, so we contact them and ask to be picked up. But what then?'

'We could go east,' Elesa suggested. 'The Builders hold no sway in Daath or Monturas.'

'And then what? Just watch and wait as the OCP slowly takes over the rest of the planet? How will the east survive if the central continent is taken?'

'The Builders won't let the OCP off the Northern Continent,' Elesa said. 'They'll protect their own lands, if not ours.'

'Will they?' Gigolo asked, sounding unimpressed. 'One of the reasons I stayed with Andreus was because I thought he'd be capable of defending Nasces and putting an end to this crisis. You've been around him almost as much as I have- does he seem capable of defending this planet?'

'He's certainly not helping the Alliance,' Elesa conceded, 'but when it comes to his own clan being threatened-'

'It's not just that he's fighting the people who were offering him a favorable alliance,' Gigolo interrupted. 'It's that he's shown himself to be completely incompetent at it! We cannot leave our futures in his hands.'

Elesa smiled again. 'I agree completely,' she said, catching Gigolo off balance.

'I- you do?' he asked, surprised.

'Of course,' Elesa said. 'I share your opinion of that moron.'

'Then why did you argue against me?'

'I like to be contrary from time to time.' _Plus it's fun seeing you get so worked up. _'I agree that we have to do something, but the question is- what can we do to help?'

'I don't know,' Gigolo admitted. 'I have this power- surely there's something I can do!'

I know who can give us advice. 'Why don't we ask Alcor? He's helped us before.'

'He's a Builder,' Gigolo said. 'Why would he help us?'

'He didn't seem like he liked Andreus,' Elesa pointed out.

'Still, I'm not sure we can trust him.'

'I'll give him a call,' Elesa said. 'We'll see if he's willing to help us out. If there is anything at all suspicious, we don't follow through. Is that okay?'

'I guess,' Gigolo said uncomfortably.

A distant explosion brought the two of them back out of their conversation. Gigolo turned in it's direction, worry showing clearly on his face. 'We're going to have to move soon,' he said.

'Let me get in contact with Midori and Alcor first,' Elesa said. Gigolo nodded and walked back into the warehouse.

I sure hope I'm right,_ Elesa thought as she began to call Midori. _There's more at stake than just our lives now._

2

The Ghost Peninsular came into sudden view as Vivian dropped the Pelican out of the clouds. It's distinctive chalk cliffs rose giddily out of the sea for several thousand kilometers, forming a narrow chain of what were essentially connected islands. At its thinnest point the chain was barely a kilometer thick, while some areas were almost a hundred kilometers wide, sporting the rolling hills and lush temperate climate seen in Daath and Melaska. The area as a whole was far warmer than the rest of the northern continent thanks to a warmer current that flowed from the Azure Gulf far to the south up through the Trinician gap, and was more densely populated than most of the North.

Vivian nudged Tomalon in the ribs, waking him. 'We'll be in their airspace soon,' she said. 'Could you do the talking?'

'Um. Sure.' Tomalon switched his radio on, rubbing sleep from his eyes. Vivian was relying on him to get them safely into the Ghost Alliance. He'd been the leader of a major clan before the OCP destroyed it, and hopefully still had some sway with the Vernon, the leader of the Steel Templars and now of the whole of the Ghost Alliance.

'Black Runner aircraft, you are entering Ghost airspace,' came the hail a few minutes later. 'Identify yourself and state your intentions.'

Tomalon cleared his throat. 'I am Tomalon, formerly of Vermillion. I request to join the Ghost Alliance.'

There was a brief pause before the radio crackled again. 'Hold position. Templar aircraft are on their way to escort you in.'

'Thanks,' Tomalon said, and then ended the communication.

'They accepted that rather quickly,' Vivian remarked as she brought the aircraft to a halt.

'Maybe they've had a lot of refugees?' Tomalon suggested. 'It doesn't take a genius to work out that the Ghost peninsula is the most defensible place in the North.'

'You don't think they recognized your name?'

'I doubt it. I only visited the Steel Templars once or twice. Normally Meier hosted our meetings.'

Vivian nodded. She'd been at one of those meetings, when they had discussed the Blackhead threat. It already felt like such a long time ago.

'What about Vernon? He'll know who you are.' Who knows, he might even remember me. I sure remember him.

Tomalon sighed. 'I'm not sure we should, ah, make our presence known to him.'

'Why not?'

'I don't know about you, but I'd quite like some peace and quiet. We're more likely to get that if nobody thinks we're anything more than a pair of refugees from the battle in Nasces.'

'So you don't want to fight anymore?'

'Did I say that?' Tomalon asked, irritated. He shook his head. 'I'm just... tired.'

I know what he means. All this fighting, all this running. It takes it out of you. Vivian frowned. Wasn't she supposed to fight, though? There was something very important she had to do.

Vivian's ruminations were interrupted by the arrival of their escort. A pair of Banshees came swooping out of the clouds, maneuvering around the stationary Pelican.

'Please follow us, Tomalon of Vermillion,' the lead pilot said over radio. 'Take exactly the same path as we do.' Vivian took the controls again and began to fly the Pelican after the pair of Banshees. It was no easy task- the heavy Pelican had never been designed to match the nimble interceptors. Vivian just hoped that the pilot hadn't been too serious in his instructions.

'Odd that they want us to take a fixed path,' Tomalon remarked. 'I suppose they're just being cautious.'

'Do you think they expect to be attacked?' Vivian asked.

'Quite possibly. Though Vernon may not have expansion in mind,

they're the biggest threat to the Builders right now. Andreus might well be considering a preemptive strike to stop them from assisting the Nasces Alliance.'

'I suppose so,' Vivian said. 'It's sad that we're still fighting among ourselves despite the threat the OCP presents.'

The Steel Templars base was located near the edge of the third and largest of the 'islands' that made up the Ghost Peninsular, Moroi. There were a handful of other clan bases on the island, though they were now dependencies of the Ghost Alliance.

'Please land on the green lit landing pad,' the pilot communicated again. 'There will be representatives to assist you.'

'Sounds like this is a fairly common occurrence for them then,' Tomalon said. 'They've got a routine down for it.'

Sure enough, a few Spartans were standing at the edge of the pad as Vivian brought the Pelican in to land. They began to approach as Vivian and Tomalon exited the aircraft.

'Good evening,' the first Spartan said when they were out of the Pelican. 'You said you were here to join us; is that correct?'

'It is,' Tomalon confirmed. 'I am Tomalon, and this is Vivian.'

'You said you were from Vermillion? Your markings are those of the Black Runners.'

'I'm from Vermillion originally. Vivian's an Aspertian. We stayed with the Black Runners for about a week.'

'Okay,' the Spartan said, taking notes on a palmtop. 'We'll need to run a background check on you before we can let you in, since you've come from the south. It shouldn't be an issue though; you're both obviously northerners. If you'd like to follow me.' The Spartan began to walk into the base, the other Spartans following behind. With a mutual shrug Tomalon and Vivian followed as well. I suppose our accents are Highlander. They'd probably be more suspicious around a Crest.

They were led to a waiting room a few floors down from the landing pads, where a handful of other Spartans were waiting around. Their guide pointed out the toilets and warned them not to leave the room before disappearing, leaving the pair of them alone.

'That was formal,' Vivian remarked, sitting down.

'It was certainly nothing like my experiences of changing clans,' Tomalon agreed. 'Granted, I've been in Vermillion my whole life until now.'

'I just hope we don't get to experience it to many more times.' Vivian looked at the other Spartans in the room, trying to place them by the markings on their armor. A few she saw were from Nasces clans, while others she recognized included Jurisan, Mydrar and Deddeneas—all clans currently on the front line of the OCP's advance. Cowards fleeing their duty. But am I any different? Surprisingly there weren't any Strikers to be seen, despite several clans in the Striker

federation being close to the edge of the OCP's territory. More worrying were the handful of Spartans without markings on their armor- the last remains of destroyed clans.

Time passed slowly in the waiting room. Periodically a Templar would come in and speak with one of the other occupants. Some were led off, others arrived. Vivian was at once impressed by the formality of the immigration operation that was being run, and scared by the inhumanity of it.

Eventually the same Spartan as before came in and asked the pair to confirm their names and home clans, a concerned look on her face. When they'd done so she walked out again, muttering to herself softly.

'What was that about?' Vivian asked.

'I think we're going to find out pretty soon,' Tomalon replied.

3

Lucas took a wide route to get to Daath, skirting Solidade and the Northern Continent by what he viewed to be a safe margin. He passed through the northern edges of the Central Waste, seeing for the first time the huge desert that spanned a good proportion of the Central Continent. From there he headed north-east, passing over the Trinician Gap and along the coastline to Daath.

'I maintain what I said about Oaktier,' Midori said as Daath came into view, 'But Daath is something else entirely.'

'It's quite impressive, isn't it?' Lucas agreed. 'I've seen pictures before, but they didn't do it justice at all.'

Lucas pulled his Pelican up and over the outer ring of clan bases. His Pelican bore Black Runner markings, so in theory the Eastern clans would have no interest in shooting it down- none of them wanted a diplomatic incident with the Builders- but it never hurt to be cautious. Midori walked to the edge of the cockpit as they passed over the edge of the city, taking it in with awe.

'How is it all burning?' she asked.

'It's not all burning,' Lucas replied. 'It just puts out a lot of smoke.'

'But how? I mean, Nasces was nothing at all like this, and the clans there fight all the time.'

'They fight, but nothing like as fiercely as the clans of Daath do. It's due to the Citadel; they promote some idea that the harder you fight in life, the more likely you are to achieve enlightenment, or some nonsense like that.'

'That's... quite a nice idea, actually.'

'Oh yeah?' Lucas grinned. 'You thinking of taking it up yourself?'

'Not in that way,' Midori said. 'I mean from the Citadel's point of view. They end up with a bunch of loyal clans who've spent their lives training at war.'

'Why, I do believe my attitude is finally wearing off on you. We'll make a cynic of you yet.'

Midori laughed. 'It's far too much effort to keep up the level of cynicism you maintain.'

Lucas received docking clearance from the Citadel's air control and brought the Pelican in to land.

'Now, they can be a bit touchy at times, so be careful,' Lucas warned. 'We're not staying long.'

Lucas and Midori walked out of the Pelican to greet the robed Spartan walking towards them. Lucas took the opportunity to take a look around; they were on a landing pad about half way up the Citadel. The base of the 'Spiritual Leaders' of the East was certainly impressive to look at. From the outside it was a massive stone palace sat on the crest of a hill, overlooking the surrounding city. Though made of gray rock, the whole base was bathed in deep red from the many fires lighting the city of Daath. In the courtyards below, Lucas could see shadowed figures hurrying about. There were few lights on show, despite the late hour. Apparently the Citadel's rulers liked the atmosphere provided by the pervasive red light.

'Marielle didn't say she was sending someone in her place,' the Spartan said suspiciously as soon as he reached them. 'Do you have the packages we ordered?'

'They're just in there,' Lucas replied, gesturing to the back of the Pelican. 'Just what you asked for.'

'I'll be the judge of that,' the Spartan replied. He climbed into the Pelican and began to check through the boxes, muttering softly to himself.

'What a weirdo,' Midori whispered to Lucas. He nodded. 'A powerful weirdo, mind.'

'Everything seems to be in order,' the robed Spartan pronounced. He stepped back out of the Pelican, scowling. 'Inform Marielle that the next shipment had best be delivered in person, if she wishes to stay on the Citadel's good side.'

'I will be sure to,' Lucas said, intending to do no such thing.

That will cause somebody else problems, asshole.

But not me. And me is the most important person to me.

You're disgusting.

'If you would kindly leave,' the robed Spartan said testily. 'We would prefer not to suffer heathens in our city for longer than strictly necessary.'

'We'll be gone before you know it,' Lucas said. He turned and walked slowly back to the Pelican, making his lack of haste obvious. Midori giggled beside him.

'You shouldn't have antagonized him like that,' she said with a smile when they were safely in the Pelican.

'In my experience, Spartans like him could do with a little antagonizing,' Lucas replied, getting into the pilot's seat. He waited until Midori had strapped herself in, and then lifted off, pulling the aircraft into the sky and away from the Citadel.

'Weird place, Daath,' Midori said. 'It wasn't how I expected. I thought the city was supposed to be a trade hub?'

'Not to the same level as Nasces or Keved,' Lucas replied. 'It does have some large docks, but you couldn't really see them from where we were.'

'They're a strange people.'

'Everyone is, babe. Everyone but us.'

There was a moment of silence. 'Hang on, Elesa's calling me,' Midori said. 'Lemme just take this.'

Midori cleared her throat. 'Hey Elesa! How- we're fine, don't worry. We're just leaving Daath now. It's a long story, believe me. Anyway, how are you?'

There was a long pause. Lucas wished he knew what was being said.

'Uh huh,' Midori said finally. 'But you're both safe? Okay. Where are you exactly? Alright. Yeah, that's fine. We'll be there soon. See ya.' Midori hung up.

'Well?' Lucas asked.

Midori frowned. 'Things have gotten worse since we left. Supposedly there's some sort of battle taking place between the Builders and the Nasces clans.'

'How are they?'

'Gigolo and Elesa are both fine, for now. Something happened, but Elesa wouldn't tell me what. Anyway, they need transportation out of the city.'

'Right. Who will be shooting at us this time?'

'Both sides, apparently,' Midori said. Lucas laughed. 'We're still flying the Black Runner colors, but the Builders might know we're not on their side anymore.'

'Sounds like this is going to get interesting,' Lucas said, chuckling. 'Alright, let's go save those two idiots.' He pulled the Pelican around and began to fly west, away from the smoke and fire of Daath.

24. Those who Fight Further (2)

4

'I told you this would happen,' Vivian said. 'Did you listen?'

'I did, actually, which is why I know you said nothing of the sort.' Tomalon tried to look more confident than he felt, which wasn't hard. He'd never gotten along particularly well with Vernon. Sure, he'd respected the older Spartan- the man was a military genius, and an excellent ruler- but they'd clashed outside the battlefield over political matters. Meier had always been the one who held their informal alliance together. In many ways the Aspertian had been the middle ground between their two ideologies. Vernon had never liked the idea of holding commanders accountable to the population, a state which Tomalon had ruled in since his ascension to commander of the Vermillion military.

Vivian looked thoughtful for a moment. 'You may be right there,' she said uncertainly. 'I'm pretty sure I said something related, though.'

Tomalon shrugged. What was keeping Vernon? It had been almost ten minutes since the attendant had told them to wait outside the Templar's command center and gone inside. Was Vernon making them wait for a reason? Was he trying to show Tomalon that they were no longer on the same level? It was the sort of thing he'd do, surely.

The door opened, and the attendant came out, gesturing for them to go in. Steeling himself, Tomalon walked into the command center. It was dark inside, with many of the monitors that would usually be displaying status reports and map information powered down. Only one Spartan stood inside.

'So you really are alive,' Vernon said as Tomalon and Vivian walked in. With his full armor and blanked out faceplate, the old Spartan made an imposing -and unreadable- presence.

'It would seem so,' Tomalon replied, keeping his voice flat.

'Who's the girl?' Vernon asked, looking past Tomalon.

'Vivian, formerly of Aspertias,' Vivian said. 'We've met before, sir.'

Vernon nodded. 'I remember. Meier spoke highly of you.' He turned to Tomalon. 'In case you're worried, I'm not going to insist you start from the beginning again. A place in command of my armies is yours, if you want it. For Vivian too.'

'Thank you,' Tomalon replied. 'I'd be honored. Sir.'

Vernon sighed. 'All this formality from you feels weird.' He reached up and took his helmet off. 'Now that we've merged the clans, our central command has been moved closer to the front lines, where we're building the wall.' He gestured around the empty room. 'While we're here, you can talk freely.'

Tomalon nodded gratefully. 'Again, thanks. Are there any other

Spartans from Vermillion here?'

'A few dozen,' Vernon said. 'I'm not sure on the exact numbers. Aspertias contributed the most to the evacuation, but there were some who came here or went elsewhere.'

'Did anyone else survive Aspertias?' Vivian asked, then shrank back as Vernon looked at her. 'Sorry.'

'Until half an hour ago I had assumed everyone in Aspertias had died, if that answers your question. We sent a rescue mission once we heard, but we were too late. By the time they reached your clan, there were only Blackheads left.' Vernon shrugged. 'I'm sorry. That said, it's possible some survived without my knowledge- after all, you're here now.'

Tomalon shook his head. 'I doubt anyone else escaped. We were the last ones out, minutes before the Blackheads took the landing pads.'

'Meier refused to let anyone evacuate, didn't he?' Vernon asked.

Tomalon nodded regretfully. 'I don't think he was quite in his right mind towards the end.'

'Hmm.' Vernon leaned on the powered down map, fiddling idly with one of the controls. 'I wonder why that was.'

Tomalon couldn't stop himself from glancing at Vivian. She looked away.

'Still,' Vernon said, 'No sense dwelling on the past. The present is much more important to us.' He switched on the map, bringing up an overhead view of the Ghost Peninsular and the area surrounding Nasces. 'The Blackheads will reach Nasces in a little over two days time. It shouldn't take them long to capture the city, and then they will move against us.' On the map a red patch appeared in the north, and spread down across the Nasces plains, capturing base after base until it reached the city. 'They'll cross the lowlands in no time at all, since there are few clans to oppose them beyond Pastorias.'

'Won't they head south?' Tomalon asked. 'Solidade must be a tempting target for the OCP.'

'If indeed they pick targets like that,' Vernon mused. 'We still don't know whether Blackheads act alone or have some controlling intelligence.' He shook his head. 'Regardless, I believe the Builders intend to destroy the SolNas bridge when the Blackheads arrive.'

'But isn't it made of-'

'Of Heartstone, yes. I don't know how they plan to destroy it, though I think it may have something to do with that space station they've been constructing in secret for the last decade.'

'I'm sorry?' Vivian asked. 'What have they been making?'

'The Anchor,' Tomalon said, a sickening realization hitting him. 'It's a weapons platform? They signed a treaty to never put weapons in orbit!'

'They also signed a treaty saying that they'd never annex Solidade' Vernon said wryly. 'Thompson had little patience for treaties, and it seems Andreus has less.'

'Would you please tell me what this space station is?' Vivian asked, and then started when Vernon stared at her.

'It's like an outpost in orbit around this planet,' Tomalon explained. 'They found an asteroid and shunted it into an equatorial orbit. They then mined it out and built a base inside.'

Vivian still looked confused. I guess she never learned about stuff like this. Tomalon wasn't surprised. In the North, all a Spartan was usually taught was how to fight effectively. The only reason he knew about the Anchor was because it had been something he'd had to take into account as a clan leader.

'While we're on the topic,' Tomalon continued, 'what do you intend to do about Nasces?'

'I'm leaning towards sitting this one out,' Vernon said. 'The Builders are never going to keep the city- even if they take it from the Nasces Alliance, they have no means to defend it. Without Nasces, they lack a suitable staging ground to attack us here.'

'But if the OCP takes Nasces, you'll have countless more Blackheads to worry about,' Vivian said. 'There's thousands of cores in the city.'

'And how exactly am I supposed to stop that from happening?' Vernon asked. 'If I try to destroy the cores I'll simply weaken us to the point that we'll be incapable of holding the Ghost Peninsular. I can't waste my people's lives like that.'

'Vivian has a point though,' Tomalon said. 'Sitting and doing nothing won't help you.'

'It's not about what helps us,' Vernon replied. 'It's about what harms us the least. Whatever happens, we're not going to come out of this war in a good state. I simply want to save as many Spartans as possible.'

'What makes you think you can hold out against the Blackheads?' Vivian asked angrily. 'Every clan they've attacked has fallen within days.'

'And every Spartan who has ever lived has died,' Vernon snapped. 'Look, if you can provide me with a plan that doesn't put too many lives at risk for the reward, I will happily go through with it. We've yet to come up with one ourselves.'

Thompson sighed. 'Let's stop arguing,' he said. 'Vernon, surely you agree that at least assisting the Nasces Alliance is preferable to letting them die when the Blackheads arrive. You could evacuate some of them here, or even across the straits.'

Vernon nodded. 'That's a sensible suggestion. I suppose it wouldn't be too difficult, provided the Builders didn't interfere.'

'Alright then,' Tomalon said, suddenly exhausted. 'Vivian, are you happy with that?'

'As long as we're doing something,' Vivian said curtly.

'If we're agreed, I think I could do with some rest,' Tomalon said. Vernon nodded, and pressed a button on the map table. The attendant from earlier stepped in.

'Please find these two some rooms-' Tomalon gave Vernon a meaningful look- 'a room for the night.'

With a grateful goodbye, Tomalon and Vivian turned to walk out of the command center.

'A moment, Tomalon,' Vernon said just as he was walking out the door.

'Go on ahead,' Tomalon told Vivian. He walked back into the darkened room, shutting the door behind him.

'Tell her to be careful,' Vernon said. 'I can't have someone questioning my every action when we're in public.'

'I'll make sure she knows this was a one off thing,' Tomalon said.

'Good. And make sure you hold onto her.' Vernon smiled wistfully. 'As Meier said, she's an impressive woman.'

'I will,' Tomalon said truthfully. 'I'm trying my very hardest.'

5

Gigolo took a close look at the approaching Pelican from his hiding spot using his helmet's image magnification. A pair of familiar Spartans were sat in the cockpit. Smiling, he stood up and walked into the light they were training on the building, waving. The figures waved back.

Elesa appeared on the roof beside him. 'Is it them?' she asked.

'Yep,' Gigolo replied happily. Lucas turned the Pelican around and brought it down onto the rooftop, keeping the lights switched on.

As soon as the rear door swung open Midori was out, running to embrace Elesa.

'I'm so glad you're safe,' she said. 'If I'd known how poorly things were going here I would never have left.'

'You had good reasons,' Elesa replied, returning the hug. 'Thanks for coming.'

Gigolo nodded to Lucas. Lucas returned the greeting in kind.

'So what's the plan?' Lucas asked when Midori and Elesa separated themselves. 'Where are we running to?'

'We're not running,' Gigolo said firmly. 'We have to stand and fight.'

'But we'll die!' Midori said. 'We can't win this fight!'

'I'm afraid we don't have much of a choice,' Elesa replied, her tone harsh. 'No matter where we go, the OCP will follow. If we don't stand up to it now, we'll simply have to fight it later, when the odds are more heavily stacked against us.'

'So what do you mean to do?' Lucas asked calmly. 'Stand in front of the horde and open fire? What good would that do?'

'Of course I don't mean that,' Elesa snapped.

'There are other ways to fight,' Gigolo said. 'Not just the literal interpretation. We may not be strong by ourselves, but if we apply it right, there's a lot we can do.'

'Like what?' Midori asked. 'You don't know, do you?'

'Actually,' Lucas said, 'All this talk has jogged my memory. What was it those crates we helped load in Oaktier contained?'

Midori shrugged. 'Some weapon? I don't remember exactly.'

'The harpoon system, she called it,' Lucas said slowly. 'A weapon that could wipe out a horde of Blackheads in a single strike.'

'What's this?' Gigolo asked.

'When we were in Oaktier, we met a Builder who wanted some help doing heavy lifting,' Lucas explained. 'It was as strange as it sounds. I think she assumed we were involved in some sort of internal Builder politics. Anyway, she explained what some of the parts we were loading were. The ones she was transporting were components for some weapon called the Harpoon. I'm afraid we didn't find anything else about it, save that it was apocalyptically powerful.'

'That sounds like something we could use,' Gigolo said. 'So we go and steal this weapon, whatever it is, and use it to save Nasces!'

'Shouldn't we just leave it to the Builders?' Midori asked skeptically. 'I mean, they're going to be interested in saving themselves aren't they? And besides, they'll know how to operate it far better than we can.'

'We already discussed this,' Elesa said, shaking her head. 'The Builders can't be trusted to defend this city, or themselves. It's dark, so I suppose you couldn't really see it, but the city is in ruins. They're fighting the Nasces Alliance into the ground. Nobody is going to win this.'

'Plus, Andreus is something of a psycho,' Gigolo added. 'Not to

mention incompetent. He won't be able to help this city.'

'So let me get this straight,' Lucas said, obviously not convinced. 'You want to steal the most powerful weapon ever developed from the strongest clan on the planet, who by a strange coincidence also really want us dead.' He laughed. 'Was there anything else?'

'Hey, you mentioned the Harpoon in the first place,' Gigolo said indignantly. 'I thought you wanted us to do something with it.'

'I only brought it up to point out how the Builders have this under control,' Lucas said, still laughing. 'Although, your plan has a certain style to it, I have to admit.'

'Will you help us?' Gigolo asked.

Lucas shrugged. 'I may as well. You up for this, Midori?'

'No!' Midori looked at Elesa. 'This is insane! We'll die for sure, and then we'll be in a whole new world of trouble. We can't do this!'

'We don't have a choice,' Gigolo replied.

'Yes we do! Who says it has to be us? We're four nobodies who've just had the good luck to survive this far. There are any number of Spartans like us far more qualified to go and save the world.'

'There's nobody more qualified than Gigolo,' Elesa said firmly. 'Don't you see? This power was given to him for a reason.'

'You think it's connected?' Lucas asked.

Elesa shook her head. 'I'm sure of it,' she replied. 'This is what we're meant to do.'

'I never thought of you as the deterministic type.'

'I'm not, but...' Elesa shrugged. 'Things happen for a reason.'

Midori looked between Elesa and Lucas, despair in her eyes. 'That's bullshit! Besides, Gigolo has the power, not me.'

'Then you don't have to go all the way,' Elesa said. 'Our first step should be to meet Alcor. I got in touch with him a little while ago; he seemed willing to help us.'

'And what?'

'You come with us that far, and then if you still don't want to help, you can stay with him.'

Midori looked away. 'I guess... fine. I'll come with you.'

Elesa sighed. 'Thanks. I mean it. You'll help, I promise.'

'So we just have to find Alcor? Sounds easy enough,' Lucas said. 'Where is he?'

'Well,' Elesa replied sheepishly, 'that's the problem.'

6

'Cressat will be visible in a few minutes,' Lucas announced over the Pelican's intercom. 'You'll probably want to see this.' Elesa shook Gigolo awake and walked into the cockpit.

'I know we've been inside Builder airspace since we passed Solidade, but seeing this now...' Midori sighed, following Elesa in. 'I can't believe we're really doing this. What happens if they catch us?'

'They won't catch us,' Elesa reassured her. 'We're safe in this aircraft. With all the confusion of the past few days, nobody officially reported you two as AWOL. I even had Alcor run a search to be sure- nobody is looking for this Pelican.'

'Which is why we've been able to fly straight across the central continent without anyone attacking us,' Lucas added from the pilot's seat. 'I still would have rather we flew around Solidade and over the wastes.'

'Speed is of the essence,' Elesa said curtly. She couldn't help a glance at her timepiece; it was just past midday, Nasces time, and would probably be evening by the time they reached Alcor. The Blackhead horde was due to arrive at sunset the following day. *Will it be enough time?*

As Lucas had predicted, Cressat appeared over the horizon a few minutes later, as Gigolo dragged himself groggily into the cockpit. It took Elesa's breath away, just as Nasces had when she first laid eyes on the northern city.

It was vast. Colossal, huge, mind numbingly large. As more and more of the city came into view, it became apparent just how much of an understatement Lucas had been making when he'd described it as 'big'; granted, he'd never been there before himself. Miles and miles of buildings stretched out ahead of them, some huge, some small, sprawling over an area the size of Nasces, Solidade and Daath combined twice over. At the city's center lay the Builder base; a fortress to match the city built around it. The size of the city was so great that even as they passed over the outer districts, Elesa still couldn't see it from their elevated position, though in the distance she could see the silver gleam of the Makomora river that passed through Cressat on its way to the Sinan Coast.

The city looked very little like Nasces usually did, either. For one, the absence of the usual smoke clouds and battle scenes was very noticeable. Most cities on the planet were places of constant warfare- a natural effect of having so many Spartans so close together, and taken to it's extreme in Daath- but in Cressat there was none of that. Elesa remembered some things Alcor had told her about Cressat- that all of the clans in the city were strictly vassal clans of the Builders, and that as a result they rarely fought, not even to settle boundary disputes or the like. Elesa found herself wondering what all of the Spartans in the city did with their time, if not fighting.

'I had a look at those co-ordinates Alcor gave us,' Lucas said. 'It's somewhere on the southeastern edge of the city, nowhere near the Builder Fortress.'

'That's a relief,' Midori said, sighing. 'I was half worrying we'd be having to sneak into the Builder base to meet him.'

'We'd not get within a mile of the place,' Gigolo snorted. 'They may not be looking for this bird, but they sure as heck are looking for us.'

Lucas turned the Pelican eastwards, angling it towards the co-ordinates they'd been given.

'This could be a trap, you know,' Midori said quietly. 'How do we know we can trust Alcor? He is a Builder, after all.'

'We don't have a choice,' Gigolo said firmly. 'If we're going to save Nasces we're just going to have to take that chance.'

'More to the point,' Elesa added, 'Alcor didn't seem to like Andreus, or approve of what he was doing. He even said that was why he was transferred back to Cressat as soon as Andreus took charge.'

'All the same, I don't think we should just blindly trust Alcor,' Lucas said. 'I'll land the Pelican nearby and we can scout out the area before we decide whether or not to meet him.'

'That sounds reasonable,' Elesa agreed. Gigolo and Midori nodded as well.

It took quite some time to reach the southeastern edge of the city. For quite a long time the only thing that could be seen out of the cockpit was more of Cressat- the city truly seemed endless, and surprisingly bland compared to Nasces and Solidade. Despite the amount of time they spent in Builder airspace, they weren't once contacted by air control, although given the sheer number of aircraft flying over the city, it wasn't too surprising.

The co-ordinates translated to an abandoned residential district on the outskirts of a disbanded clan's base, which had apparently been left unused in case a future clan needed space. Lucas landed the Pelican in a nearby park and the four of them walked the short distance to the apartment block that the co-ordinates indicated. There was little activity around- the only traffic nearby belonged to Spartans passing through the district- but Elesa still didn't feel safe. It didn't feel right to be so close to the headquarters of a clan that wanted her dead with a passion.

Alcor awaited in the lobby of the apartment block, fiddling with a laptop quietly. He stood as they approached.

'Elesa! It's good to see you safe,' he said, hugging her. 'It wasn't a pleasant surprise to see you on the bounty list, let me tell you.'

'It's not hugely pleasant for me either,' Elesa said. She glanced around her squad. 'You've met Gigolo. This is Lucas, and Midori. Midori's an Aspertian like me. Lucas came from the Scorpions.'

'Yes, I believe we met briefly,' Alcor said, shaking their hands. 'In any case, let me extend you a formal welcome to Cressat, my home city.' He turned and walked into the building, gesturing for them to follow. 'It's a shame you couldn't have come under better circumstances. I'd have loved to give you a tour.'

'Maybe when all of this is over,' Gigolo said. 'We can't stay long, unfortunately.'

'You can tell me all about your mission inside,' Alcor said, stopping by an apparently random apartment. He pushed a key into the lock, and then tapped the door in several random locations. The door swung open silently. 'This is one of my safe-rooms. It's a little dusty, I'm afraid- I've not had cause to use it in almost a decade.'

The apartment looked quite similar to the standard ones Elesa had been used to back at Aspertias, if a little larger than the one she had shared with Midori. There were some obvious differences, though- the door was reinforced and had a complicated looking lock, and metal shutters covered the windows. An alarm system blinked mutely at them, and some high-tech equipment was installed where the lounge would have normally been.

'This is... impressive,' Gigolo said, looking around. 'Did you put all of this together?'

'I inherited it, actually,' Alcor said, wiping dust off one of the kitchen counters. 'A friend of mine had it built almost two centuries ago, during the troubles following Thompson's ascension. It's a perfect hiding place- nobody else in the Builders knows it exists.'

Gigolo and Elesa exchanged a glance. Troubles? Why would a Builder need a hiding place?_

'So, you were about to tell me what you planned to do next?' Alcor prompted, rummaging through some cupboards. 'I'm afraid all the food that's left is canned.'

'Uh, yeah,' Gigolo said, slightly put off. 'We're going to save Nasces.'

'Is that so?' Alcor asked. 'How do you plan to do that?'

'We'll use the Harpoon,' Elesa said. 'That can stop the Blackheads, right?'

Alcor laughed suddenly. 'The Harpoon, eh?' He pulled some cans out of the cupboard and began opening them, still chuckling. 'Do you know what it is?'

'It's a weapon designed to kill Blackheads,' Gigolo said.

Alcor shook his head. 'I suppose it could do that, but that's not what it was made to do.' He sighed. 'It was designed to destroy clans.'

'Destroy entire clans?' Elesa frowned. 'How on earth would it do that?'

'Well, do you actually know what it is?' Elesa shook her head. 'It's a system designed to launch a kinetic bombardment from orbit. Basically, it fires tungsten rods at high speeds directly down onto a target. By the time they hit they've built up a huge amount of kinetic energy, and destroy everything within a quite large distance.'

'So it's just a large cannon?' Gigolo asked, unimpressed. 'Where did you say it fired from?'

'I suppose you could think of it like that,' Alcor replied as he put the food on the oven to cook. 'But much more powerful. It fires from space.' He obviously saw the confusion on their faces, for he went on, 'You are aware that our planet is shaped like a large sphere? Space is the area beyond the atmosphere that we breathe. The weapon is stationed up there- it's actually attached to a space station called the Anchor- traveling in a circle around the planet. Obviously, if you dropped something from that height, it would be moving very fast indeed when it hit the ground.'

'Wait, what?' Gigolo asked. 'We live on a sphere? Space?'

Alcor sighed as he stirred the soup. 'I suppose it's not something you really need to know if all you do is fight,' he said. 'Were you ever taught about this? Surely you were told something about our planet- I mean, it's not like this is restricted information.'

The Spartans shook their heads. 'Now that you mention it, we were never really taught anything beyond how to fight and survive,' Lucas said thoughtfully. 'Though we're fairly young on the whole. I guess it's just information you pick up as you go through life.'

Gigolo frowned. 'So it's very high up,' he said slowly, 'but it's still powerful enough to destroy the Blackheads?'

'It could, but as I said that's not what it was designed to do,' Alcor replied. 'The Builders know a lot about how cores work- after all, we're the ones who made them originally- and the Harpoon was designed to be powerful enough to not just disable a core, but outright destroy it, and the clan that used it.'

'That's... scary,' Elesa said. 'The Builders have the power to wipe out entire clans? Why haven't they already used it?'

'It's been in development for the past decade or so; in fact this is the first I've heard of it nearing completion.' Alcor tasted the soup, and then began pouring it into bowls. 'But you're correct, of course. The Builders cannot be allowed to maintain possession of this weapon- it's just too powerful.' He thought for a moment. 'I may be able to help you with this plan, on the condition that you destroy the Harpoon after you've finished with it.'

'You'll help us?' Elesa asked, relieved. 'That makes me far more confident that we'll succeed.'

'As long as you're prepared to do all the actual work,' Alcor said with a smile. 'I'm far too old for adventures like this. I'll stay right here and provide support from a safe distance.'

Elesa's smile faded. I suppose it's a bit much to ask....

'Now, the biggest challenge is going to be getting to the Anchor in the first place,' Alcor continued. 'The only way up is one of the routine cargo flights that leave from Ash Mesa, but they're heavily guarded. I can get you access to the spaceport, but you'll have to hijack one of the flights and take it up yourselves.'

'This is sounding less and less feasible,' Midori muttered.

'It's sounding more and more interesting,' Lucas replied with a laugh. 'What then? The four of us assault this heavily defended space station?'

'Well, yeah,' Alcor said. He handed the four Spartans a bowl of soup each. 'All we've got is canned food,' he said apologetically. 'The station staff don't carry weapons- too much risk of a blowout- so all you'll need to do is disable the turrets on the station's exterior and you'll be in.'

'It can't be that easy,' Gigolo said skeptically.

'What made you think it would be?' Alcor asked. 'The hard bit is getting on the spacecraft themselves. Since we're the only ones with rocket technology, it never made sense to defend the actual space station.'

'Let me get this straight,' Gigolo said. 'You want the four of us to infiltrate a heavily defended spaceport, hijack an even more heavily defended spacecraft, and assault a space-fortress? Any other impossible tasks you'd like done before breakfast?'

'You said you'd fight to defend Nasces,' Elesa said quietly. 'This is how you do it.' She looked at her companions. 'We're all here because we decided to stand and fight. We decided to do what we could for our friends and countrymen.'

'I'm up for it,' Lucas said. 'You'll need a pilot for those spacecraft.'

'I never said I wouldn't fight,' Gigolo added. 'What's one more impossibility to add to the pile?'

Midori sighed, not looking at any of the others. 'I think... I think I'll stay here.'

'Babe?' Lucas asked, concerned. 'Are you sure?'

'I... I'll just hold you back,' Midori said, shaking her head. 'I'll find some way to help Alcor. I just... I can't put myself through this.'

'Is that okay with you?' Gigolo asked Alcor.

'I see no reason why not,' Alcor said. 'I should be able to find some way for you to help.'

'Thanks,' Midori said.

Elesa sighed. 'Well, the rest of us are in agreement. Let's do this.'

Alcor grabbed Elesa as they were going to bed and pulled her into a corner.

'Before you leave, there's something I need to tell you.' He grimaced. 'I've been looking into various inconsistencies in the Builders over the past few years, and I think I'm close to finding something major.'

'What is it?' Elesa asked.

'I don't know for sure, but there's definitely something going on below the surface. Don't trust Andreus, for one. He looks like a fool, but I'm sure that's just an act. Thompson wouldn't choose a moron as his successor. They're up to something, and Nasces is at the heart of it.'

'Right.'

'I'm sorry to dump this all on you, but I need to pass this on in case I'm discovered. The second thing has to do with this crisis. I'm certain the Blackheads appearing wasn't a random accident. Something caused it, and we need to find out what in case it happens again. The only reason there isn't a general panic in the central continent is because everyone thinks that if the Blackheads threaten Solidade Andreus will simply destroy the SolNas bridge. But think- what if the Blackheads broke out in Daath, or Melaska, or even Cressat? We'd be fighting a desperate battle to contain them.'

Elesa thought for a while. 'What do you want me to do with this information?'

'Just hold on to it. Pass it on if you find someone trustworthy. If I discover something concrete, I'll make it known.'

'Okay.' Elesa nodded. 'I'll do that.' She turned to walk back to where they were sleeping. 'I hope you're wrong about this.'

'I hope so too,' Alcor replied. 'I really do.'

25. Those who Fight Further (3)

7

What did I do to deserve this? Why is this happening to me? None of this is my fault!

As the pain faded, Zero's mind returned from the dark place it had fled. He opened his eyes, seeing nothing but the cold stone cell and metal door that had always been there.

I'm going to kill them. Hot anger rose in Zero's chest. He was going to make Haru and Marco pay. Not just for what they'd done to him here. Over the years he'd known the couple, they'd racked up quite a debt with him, and getting him thrown in prison was the least of it.

Brisk footsteps sounded outside the door, and it opened suddenly. Marco stepped in, talking on his radio.

'Yeah. Yeah, he's here. I'll get him- alright. See you at the bridge.' He pointed at Zero. 'Get up. We're moving.'

'I don't think I can,' Zero said, trying to pull himself up. His battered muscles protested violently, and he fell back to the floor.

'You're pathetic,' Marco spat. He bent over and took Zero's arms, pulling him to his feet. 'I thought we trained you to take worse than what I gave you.'

A memory surfaced in his mind- two, in fact. Similar images of Haru in front of him, delight on her face. One decades old, another barely a day fresh.

Marco dragged Zero over to a bench in the hall. 'I'll be back in a moment,' he said. 'Don't go running anywhere.' Marco walked off, chuckling.

Zero closed his eyes, fighting off a wave of nausea. Bad memories were bubbling back now, of the times when he had thrown his lot in with Marco and Haru. They'd spoken of great ambitions, of intentions to make Aspertias a better place. Their actions were starkly opposed to those speeches.

'Here's your old armor,' Marco said, putting a box down beside Zero. 'Put it on. Quickly.'

With Marco's help, Zero managed to dress himself in his armor. The power assisted joints made it easier to stand and move, and it provided a feeling of security he'd been missing for a long time. Just being back in the white-gold suit made him feel better.

Marco checked a palmtop, frowning. 'Hold on a minute,' he said. 'Haru wants me to-' he cut off suddenly. 'Huh.' The Spartans eyes closed, and he took on an expression of concentration.

Quite suddenly a pair of Blackheads appeared behind Marco, swords held at the ready. Zero jumped in fright, backing away quickly. Marco opened his eyes and laughed.

'Do you like them?' he asked. Zero stared at him. What the hell?

'Are you- controlling them?' he asked, shocked.

'Yep,' Marco said. 'Turns out that's what they're for.' He turned to the pair of black-clad beings. 'There's a certain beauty about them, when you've been inside their heads. They're such simple beings.' he walked up to one and ran his hand along it's armor, touching lightly on it's sword. 'And so deadly. Why, I believe it was this very sword that ran your girlfriend through. What was her name again? It began with a... V?'

Zero froze. No. No. NO! He shook his head. 'You're lying. No.'

Marco laughed again. 'You should have seen it. Oh, how she squealed.'

The anger rose again, hotter and brighter than it had been before. Where earlier it had been squashed by his fear of Marco, it now pushed through and suffused his body, heating up his muscles and clearing his mind. Zero clenched his fists and drew himself up.

'You killed her?' he asked quietly.

'It was as though I drove the sword through her myself,' Marco said.

It was as though a pane of glass had shattered in Zero's head. All of a sudden his mind unfurled, spreading through the space around him. He could sense the Blackheads, see easily how to take their minds for his own. All around he could sense the minds of other Spartans in the building, and beyond in the city. He only cared about one, though. Marco's mind blazed in front of him, easily recognizable.

'I only wish I had-' Marco spun mid sentence, eyes wide behind his visor. 'Shit, it actually worked?' he said breathlessly.

Something else snapped in Zero. With a wordless yell he charged at Marco. Simultaneously he pushed at Marco's mind with the force of his will, battering against the burning light. The luminous thread that linked Marco's mind to the Blackheads snapped.

Marco stepped back, looking suddenly scared. He reached out with his own mind to seize the Blackheads back, but Zero overpowered him, taking them for himself.

'Time for you to hurt' Zero shouted, ordering the Blackheads to attack.

Marco spun, ducking under the first swipe and punching the Blackhead hard in its groin. As the Blackhead staggered back he pushed through it and began sprinting down the hall. Zero gave chase, his pet blackheads following. As he ran, he noticed the myriad other threads that left Marco's mind snapping as it contracted. In his fear, the other Spartan was losing control over his Blackheads. Zero reached out and took them over, implanting only one command in their minds-Kill.

All hell broke loose as Marco reached the end of the hall and burst through the doors. Gunfire erupted throughout the building at the same time as the cries of fear and pain began. One by one the lights in Zero's perception began to wink out of existence.

He burst through the doors at the end of the hall and saw Marco sprinting for the stairs in the corner. A trio of Spartans stood in shock some way into the room; they started to move towards Zero as he sprinted through. There was no time to lose- Zero sent one of his pet Blackheads at the trio. With a single flourish of its sword it cut them all down.

Zero swung into the stairwell, jumping down an entire flight as he sought Marco. Though dimmed, he could still clearly sense the other Spartans mind several flights below. He ran down the stairs as fast as he could, the two blackheads following obediently behind. Marco abruptly left the stairs at what seemed to be the bottom. Zero reached it a few seconds later, bursting through the doors to see

what appeared to be a motor pool; at the end was his quarry, mounting a chopper. With a burst of its engines, the exotic bike flew out of the doors and into the city.

Don't think you've escaped, you fuck. Zero pushed the thought at Marco's receding mind as he raced for a second chopper. _I'm going to make you pay._

8

At Tomalon's insistence, Vivian had come along to the war meeting. Her rank technically allowed it, but she hadn't been planning on attending- Vernon's attitude to her since she'd arrived at the Steel Templars had been dismissive at best. Though he claimed it was out of respect for her skills, she knew that her promotion had been solely to appease Tomalon. He had been a respected commander when in charge of the Vermilion military, winning fame after having to take it over unexpectedly during the Striker wars.

So she stood in the corner, presenting her opinion only when asked and otherwise keeping silent. Vernon was going through his contingency plans in the case of a Blackhead intrusion past the Ghost Wall he was constructing at the end of the peninsular. Some of the ideas were quite surprising- a wholesale evacuation to the Isle of Pramos had been suggested by one general. Even more surprisingly, Vernon had actually considered it before turning it down.

The Ghost peninsular is our home, he said. 'I will not abandon it to the OCP.'

And so the debate went on. The plans were hashed out; contingency walls were to be built on all the causeways, the rear clan bases expanded in case the forward ones were lost. A port was to be constructed on Churel, to allow easy importing of goods in the event of Nasces falling. Land was to be turned over to crop production and the old mines to be reopened; work rosters to be drawn up. The Ghost Alliance was to be fully self sufficient in all but the most advanced goods. Vernon was preparing for a siege that might last a lifetime.

The meeting was winding down when an aide hurried into the room and ran to Vernon's side. Vivian leaned forward, straining to catch what was said.

'A call for you, sir' the aide was saying.

'I'm busy,' Vernon replied, brushing the aide away.

'He said to tell you his name,' the aide persisted. 'Alcor.'

Vernon paused, looking thoughtful. Vivian exchanged a glance with Tomalon. _Could it be that Alcor?_ She couldn't think of any others. It was an uncommon name, to say the least.

'Put him on,' Vernon said eventually. 'Play it through the speakers, but only relay my voice back.'

The aide nodded and hurried to the command table, tapping in commands quickly.

Static began to play out of the speakers. 'Alcor?' Vernon asked.

'Ah, Vernon,' a familiar voice said. 'Thanks for taking this call on such short notice. I'm sure you must be very busy.'

'Quite,' Vernon replied. 'What did you want?'

'I'd like to ask a favor,' Alcor said, for it was clearly the Alcor Vivian knew. 'I need you to intervene in Nasces for me.'

The assembled officers began to mutter among themselves. Vernon ignored them, continuing to speak. 'I was considering it,' he said. 'But why?'.

'If Nasces is allowed to fall to the Blackheads, it will be a disaster for us all,' Alcor said. 'But most of all for you. There are thousands of cores in Nasces- an order of magnitude more than the OCP already controls. If it captures those cores, it will be powerful enough to overrun all the surviving Northern Clans. I don't want to see that happen.'

'And you want me to do.. what, exactly?'

'Oh, it won't be you doing the hard work,' Alcor said. 'You are aware of the Anchor. I assume? I have a team of skilled agents preparing to capture it. On it is a weapon capable of destroying the cores of Nasces.'

The muttering intensified. 'The Builders have a weapon that powerful?' Vivian asked Tomalon in a low voice. 'Why haven't they used it yet?'

'I'd heard rumors,' Tomalon replied quietly, 'But everything related to Ash Mesa is kept so tightly under wraps that we never hear anything concrete.' He grimaced. 'It sounds like exactly the sort of thing Thompson would have wanted, though.'

'So why do you need us?' Vernon asked. 'It seems like everything is being taken care of.'

'The problem is that the weapon won't be in position to fire until after the Blackheads have entered Nasces,' Alcor replied. 'And if they are allowed to cross the SolNas bridge...' he let the point hang.

Vernon was silent for a moment as he massaged his forehead. 'So you want me to defend the SolNas bridge until your team is able to destroy it?'

'That's the gist of it,' Alcor said. 'Helping with the evacuation might be a good idea as well.'

'You make a good argument,' Vernon said. The slightest hint of a smile played on his lips. 'But how do I know I can trust you? The Builders haven't exactly been helping Nasces of late.'

'Do you have any respect left for me?' Alcor asked in a hurt tone. 'I would not betray you.'

'So you say,' Vernon replied. 'Very well. We will be there.'

'Thank you. When the time comes, I will be there to help you out too.'

'I look forward to it,' Vernon replied as Alcor hung up.

The muttering stopped as Vernon looked out over the assembled Spartans. 'This meeting is adjourned,' he said. 'Get some rest. We begin preparations at seven tomorrow for deployment at three. After all, we've got a city to save.'

9

The Ash Mesa research facility lay several hundred miles north of Cressat, some way into the Central Wastes- a vast expanse of red rock and sand, broken here and there by strange windswept rock formations. Somewhere in the middle stood the Tu'ce peaks, where the clans of the same name had their bases, isolated from most of the outside world. Looking out of the Pelican's cockpit, Gigolo couldn't imagine that any Spartans could make their homes in such a desolate environment.

A single paved road cut through the monotone landscape, traversing the shortest possible distance between the Solidade-Cressat highway and Ash Mesa. Alcor hadn't been able to give Lucas the exact co-ordinates of the facility, so the pilot had simply followed the road. It wasn't the fastest route, but it saved them possibly getting lost.

Gigolo checked the HUD's clock again. _We've still got time. Stop panicking._ The Blackheads were due to enter Nasces about seven that evening, and would probably be across the Solar Straits less than two hours later if nobody stopped them. That gave them plenty of time to make a rendezvous with the Anchor and pull off their plan. It also left plenty of time for things to go wrong.

'We're about five minutes out,' Lucas said from the pilot's seat. 'I'm broadcasting the IFF signal now. Keep your visors down; the last thing we want is you being recognized.'

'I know,' Gigolo said tetchily, checking his own IFF tag. Alcor had supplied them with a set of fake tags, one for the Pelican and more for the three Spartans. Supposedly they were high enough clearance to get them into Ash Mesa, if not actually to the spacecraft they were going to steal. Elesa had come up with the idea of posing as Black Runner scientists, coming to observe their allies space program, and Alcor had said it was good enough.

'There it is,' Elesa said, pointing. A small brown blob on the horizon began to take focus through the heat haze, resolving into a large concrete strip dotted with buildings. A pair of holes in the concrete surrounded by equipment marked the spaceships they were to steal.

'Black Runner vessel, identify yourself,' came the hail moments later. 'SAM systems are tracking you.'

'This is the Black Runner pelican LM23,' Lucas read off a script. 'Transporting Black Runner observers to the Ash Mesa space

program.'

'Your visit is not scheduled,' the response came. 'Please explain.'

'Check again,' Lucas replied, adding a note of confusion into his voice. 'This visit was arranged months ago.'

'I'm looking... I'm sorry, there it is,' the voice said. 'Please use the southern landing pad. Enjoy your visit.'

Lucas breathed an audible sigh of relief. 'I have to say I didn't truly think Alcor would manage that,' he said. 'Hacking into a mainframe as secure as this one seemed beyond even him.'

'He was around when it was designed,' Elesa said absently. 'He put in a backdoor for just such a purpose.'

'How old is he exactly?' Gigolo asked.

'I don't recall. Over three hundred, certainly.'

Gigolo whistled, impressed. 'I hope we live to be that old.'

'It only seems impressive to you because you're so young,' Lucas laughed. 'Wait till you've hit a hundred. Life gets better from there on.'

Lucas brought the Pelican over the landing pad and touched down on an empty space. The three Spartans stepped out, blinking in the harsh light. From the ground Ash Mesa looked truly enormous- the buildings were scattered randomly miles apart across the sun-baked concrete. It was a good half mile from the landing pad to the nearest one.

Lucas stopped by the side of the Pelican as they made to leave. He put a hand to it's side tenderly.

'What's the matter?' Gigolo asked.

'I've come a long way with this bird,' Lucas said quietly. 'Surprisingly far in just a few days.'

'Uh... do you want a moment alone with it?' Gigolo asked, trying not to snigger too obviously.

'I'll be fine,' Lucas snapped suddenly. 'You wouldn't understand.' He strode away, not looking back.

Gigolo had worried they'd have to walk to the spaceships, but as they set out a Warthog came across the tarmac to meet them, and pulled up alongside.

'You're the Black Runner delegation, right?' the driver asked, hopping out of the vehicle. 'I'm sorry about the trouble earlier. Must have been a glitch in our system.'

'It's no trouble,' Lucas replied smoothly. 'I hope it has been fixed now?'

'Yeah, the techies think they've found the cause,' the Spartan said.

'Anyway, my name's Tsubasa. I'll be showing you around, I guess. Can I see your ID?'

'Of course,' Lucas said, gesturing to Elesa and Gigolo. 'I'm Leo, chief researcher at the Black Runners. These are Eren and Giselle.' He handed Tsubasa an ID chip, which the Builder scanned.

Why the fuck did Alcor have to pick the stupid names for us? Gigolo sighed. He'd just have to try and remember to respond when his name was called. It wouldn't be for very long anyway, no matter what happened.

'Looks just fine,' the Builder handed the ID chip back to Lucas. 'I'll drive you to the R&D facility. It's the building a few miles to the north-east.'

'Actually, could we take a look at the spacecraft first?' Lucas asked as they got into the Warthog. 'I think it would be most helpful if we could see the fruits of the research first.'

'That's fine too,' Tsubasa said. 'We don't give tours often, so there's no set route down. You just tell me what you want to see.'

'Thanks,' Lucas said. 'I appreciate it.'

They set off across the concrete towards the launch pads in the distance. Despite the appreciable speed the Warthog was capable of, it still took them some time to cover the distance. Lucas and Tsubasa made idle chatter in the meantime, the Scorpion's easy charm keeping the Builder preoccupied. Gigolo and Elesa sat in the back, tense. Gigolo found his hand straying to the cloaked weapons on his back and hip. His sword and shotgun were hidden there, along with Elesa's Sniper and Lucas's rifle. Alcor, again showing his skill with just about everything, had shown Gigolo how to use his armors built in cloaking to cover specific parts of him.

'I wasn't aware the Black Runners were taking an interest in research,' Tsubasa was saying. 'What fields do you all specialize in?'

'There really aren't enough of us to specialize in anything much,' Lucas replied, keen to keep the conversation away from their non-existent scientific knowledge.

'Surely you've got an interest in something specific though?' Tsubasa pressed. 'My research mainly covers the applications of shield technology, for example.'

'Well, if I had to pick something I'd say aerodynamics and aircraft propulsion,' Lucas replied hesitantly. 'As you saw, I'm a keen pilot. I like to look at areas that apply to that.'

'Ah, so you'd be interested in the rocket propulsion facility we have here?' Tsubasa said eagerly. 'It's quite impressive what they're able to do with fairly basic fuel types. Why, just a decade ago the Sabre fighters would never have been able to get into orbit. Now we use them all the time.'

'I'm eager to see just what you've accomplished here,' Lucas replied,

keeping his voice strictly neutral. 'Rocket engines are quite different to the sort I'm used to.'

'Of course,' the Builder said. 'What about you back there? Eren and Giselle, was it?'

'Optics,' Elesa said quickly. 'Scopes and...'

'Ah, fiber communications? I'm afraid we don't really study that here. I believe there's a facility on Calmn which does, though. A fascinating field from what I've heard.'

'Uh, yeah,' Elesa agreed uncertainly. 'That.'

'And you, Eren?'

'Cloaking,' Gigolo said after a moment's thought.

'So quite similar to Giselle, then?'

How in the world are optics related to Cloaking devices? Gigolo wished he knew how the technology he used daily worked. 'I'm more into the, ah, applied parts of it,' Gigolo said.

'Uh huh. I thought I saw a cloaking module on your armor. Are you field testing it?'

'Yeah,' Gigolo said. Mercifully the conversation turned away from their back stories as Tsubasa began to ramble on about his own research. Gigolo tuned out, trusting Lucas to be able to hold the conversation. He had an uncanny knack for making up bullshit on the spot. Gigolo just hoped Lucas didn't go too far; they'd not had time to prepare any sort of back story beyond what they had already told the Builder.

Oh please, don't fuck this up, Gigolo pleaded silently. This is our only chance.

26. Those who Fight Further (4)

10

Lucas made sure he kept the Builder's attention away from their fictional backgrounds for the remainder of the drive. It wasn't hard—the Builder kept flicking between topics that interested him, and didn't seem particularly bothered with letting Lucas speak much. He just jabbered away on various crazy tangents, and all Lucas had to do was try and work out suitable comments based on context.

Still, it was tiring and also quite dull, so Lucas was glad when the Builder pulled into the bunker entrance a few hundred meters from the launch site. He drove the Warthog into the tunnel and down a few ramps, finally pulling up in a open motor pool.

'Through here is the Spacecraft itself,' Tsubasa said as he lead his guests through a low doorway. 'Behold, the Sabre!'

The Sabres made a quite impressive sight. Two of them were stood vertically against the end of a large hall containing countless

pieces of equipment Lucas couldn't even begin to guess at the purpose of. The Spacecraft were larger than Lucas had expected, though a little shorter than a Pelican it was wide and quite bulky. Fuel tanks were attached to its body and it was itself attached to some sort of launch platform. Both Sabres looked ready to launch, in fact.

'Are they ready to launch?' Lucas asked.

'Yep, just waiting on the launch window which is in about an hour,' Tsubasa replied. 'Would you like to have a look inside?'

'Oh, yes please,' Lucas replied enthusiastically. He nodded to Gigolo, and saw him surreptitiously press a button on his com device. Alcor would know that they were getting close to the Sabres.

'They seat two, and have a modest cargo capacity,' Tsubasa said as they approached the spacecraft. 'We're also working on modifying Pelicans to give them the capability to reach orbit, which will allow us to transport far more into space.'

'Uh huh,' Lucas replied, his eyes on the Sabre. _It can't be that hard to fly, right? I bet it's fun to fly._

They climbed up onto the gantry that ran over to the open cockpits of the Sabres. 'Here, I'll show you inside,' Tsubasa said. Lucas followed him to the near Sabre, while Gigolo and Elesa walked to the far Sabre, pretending to look inside.

'May I get in?' Lucas asked, making a show of analyzing the spacecraft's cockpit. 'I'd love to fly one of these someday.'

'Of course,' Tsubasa said. 'Just make sure you don't touch anything- wouldn't want you to accidentally fly off in it!' Lucas laughed with him.

He glanced over at Gigolo, who nodded tersely. _Time to go_. The other two Spartans jumped into the Sabre and pulled the cockpit down.

'Hey!' Tsubasa walked over to the other Sabre. 'Please, don't touch anything-'

There was a sudden rumble and the Sabres came to life, buttons lighting up all across the dashboard. Most were unknown to Lucas, so he did what seemed natural. The Sabre's shields came online, as did the engines and weapons. _Bingo_.

'No- please, don't do that!' The Builder, now quite agitated, rushed back to Lucas's Sabre. 'Please get out! There's been a malfunction, or something- this is really quite dangerous!'

Lucas gave him a thumbs up, and began the launch procedures. The cockpit slid closed, and a message appeared on the computer screen that Elesa's Sabre had been slaved to his. _Thanks, Alcor._ There wouldn't have been time for Elesa to learn the hideously complicated launch routine- even Lucas, a well trained pilot, barely understood what was going on.

Tsubasa began to run away as the gantries retracted, and an alarm began to sound.

'Exit the Spacecraft Immediately,' a voice came loudly, 'Or we will open fire.'

Lucas laughed, and completed the launch routine. You wouldn't fire inside your own hangar. So long, suckers. He fired the engines, still laughing, and the two Sabres tore away into the air.

11

Before the OCP had come to the North, Vivian had only been involved in two really major wars. There had been the League Wars- four decades ago now- and the Striker Wars some thirty years back, which had seen the entire Northern Continent at war for almost two years. Vivian still remembered those days. That had been when she first saw Nasces, and had properly traveled beyond the lands surrounding Aspertias. It had also been when she first met Zero, and all of the Spartans that came with him.

I miss him. I shouldn't but I do. Why can't I forget him? Memories came unbidden, of the her and Zero, fighting side by side. Against the Strikers, against the Southerners- against other Aspertians. The memories kept coming, and so she resigned herself to them, staring out from the balcony into the dim morning light.

'Reminiscing?' came a familiar voice. Tomalon appeared beside her in the gallery, cups of coffee in both hands. Vivian accepted one gratefully.

'Yeah,' Vivian replied. 'Thinking of better days, when we never had to fear dying.'

'Those days will come again,' Tomalon said. 'We just have to keep fighting.'

'Fighting,' Vivian echoed quietly. 'That's what we do, isn't it?'

They stood in silence for a few minutes, glad of each others company.

'Have you checked over your unit?' Tomalon asked after a while.

'I haven't been assigned one,' Vivian replied. 'I'm on Vernon's personal staff.' She let the irritation show in her voice.

'It's not so bad,' Tomalon said idly. 'Show him your skills, and I'm sure he'll give you a command next time.'

Vivian sighed. 'I suppose it's a little unreasonable to expect him to give a command to an outsider he's barely met.'

'Shouldn't you be with your squad, Colonel?'

Tomalon jumped, spilling coffee down the front of his armor. 'I was just taking a short break, General,' he said quickly, spinning to face Vernon. Vivian also turned, watching with amusement as Tomalon stammered out an excuse.

'Maybe you should keep it short, then?' Vernon asked. Tomalon nodded and hurried away, barely saying goodbye to Vivian.

Vernon turned to Vivian, regarding her critically. 'Did I give you orders to meet me?' he asked.

'Not until half past eight, sir,' Vivian replied calmly. 'In five minutes.'

'So I did. Well, you may as well come with me.' Vernon began to walk away, leaving Vivian to down the coffee and put the cup down, grimacing at the bitter taste. She hurried to catch up to the General.

'You're to be one of my tactical assistants,' Vernon said. 'I'll set you to work coordinating the various squads we have deployed.'

'Isn't that... your job, sir?'

'This is a large operation. I can't keep track of every detail all of the time, which is where you come in. I've always believed that the key to an efficient army is good delegation.'

'Okay.' Vivian tried to work out what he meant. Was she to be in charge of those squads? No, Vernon had said coordination specifically, which meant she was probably going to be relaying information and making recommendations to other commanders. It was a similar role to the one she'd had under Zero during the Striker Wars. Perhaps Meier told him. But why would he?

'We'll be holding a general strategy meeting in the command center from now until just before we leave. You will use that time to familiarize yourself with our objectives and the layout of Nasces, or at least around where we expect to be fighting. Also try and get an understanding of how our command structure works; it's a little different to what you'll be used to.'

'Okay. Got it. Sir.' Any more homework you want to dump on me?

Vernon stopped suddenly, and looked Vivian in the eye. 'Despite what you and many others may think, I gave you this promotion not for Tomalon's sake but because I genuinely think you have it in you to be a good tactician. Prove me right today, and I will reward you with your own command. Does that sound like a good deal?'

'It does sir,' Vivian replied. 'Thanks.' Surprisingly good, in fact.

'Don't mention it,' Vernon said curtly, and walked away.

12

The weather had progressively worsened throughout the day, until by the time the Ghost force set off most of the south coast was under a blanket of rain and heavy clouds. The flight from the peninsular took up just over an hour, cutting across the solar straits and approaching Nasces from the southeast. As they flew, Tomalon thought he could see some of the small flotilla of ships Vernon had

conscripted to try and aid the evacuation. Many of those ships held troops and equipment, but would return with only the evacuees- the Ghost troops were expected to kill themselves to save space. It made sense, if you avoided thinking about it too much.

'Are they likely to engage us in the air?' Tomalon asked over the command channel.

'If they do, we'll not have much warning,' Vernon replied. 'Keep an eye out- we've already been pinged by their radar.'

That's encouraging. In truth, none of them had any idea how much of a presence the Builders still maintained in the city. There had been fierce fighting and much of it seemed to be ongoing, but when the Ghosts had attempted to contact the Nasces Alliance, there had been no response.

'Heads up! Aircraft approaching from the northwest!' The message came suddenly. Tomalon leaned out of the side of his Falcon and peered out into the rain. Sure enough, a flight of aircraft was becoming visible in the gloom.

Tomalon leaned back into his Falcon. 'All aircraft, spread out and keep overlapping fields of fire,' he ordered. His Falcon stayed where it was, but in the tactical view of his HUD he could see the other Falcons in his group spreading out. The Builder aircraft were still a few seconds away.

'Looks to be mainly Hornets and Falcons,' one of the other leaders reported over the command channel. 'No Vultures so far, thank goodness.'

'We outnumber them substantially,' Vernon added. 'Hold formation; we'll slaughter them.'

The two waves of aircraft collided moments later, and Tomalon forgot all except the view out of his Falcon and the fire of his gun. For what seemed like an eternity he picked targets and fired at them with the Falcon's side turret, hearing the spartan on the other side doing the same. After a time the gun behind him fell silent; Tomalon ignored the implications and focused on the fight.

Moments after the two formations collided, his gun fell silent. There were no more Builder aircraft around. In his tactical view Tomalon saw the remains of the Builder formation fleeing south, a flight of Vernon's sparrowhawks in pursuit.

'That was a diversion,' Vernon said over the command channel. 'Looks like the Builders just upped and left when they saw us coming.'

'Their command Vulture is fleeing to the south- you want us to take it out?' The leader of the Sparrowhawks asked.

'No. We'll focus on securing the bridge. Leave killing the southerners for another day.'

Man, talk about anticlimactic. Tomalon realized he was shaking slightly. I always hated aerial engagements. He'd take a fight on solid ground over one a mile up in the sky any day.

As Vernon had said, the Builder encampment at the end of the SolNas bridge had been hurriedly abandoned. The Pelicans that had been hanging back from the fighting came forward now and landed in every available flat space, disgorging Ghost troops and vehicles, while the fighting aircraft stayed in the air in case of an attack.

'All airborne units, you have your orders,' Vernon announced. 'Spread the word to as many of the Nasces clans as possible that there's an escape route.'

'What about the Alliance?' Tomalon asked.

'It's looking increasingly likely that it has been destroyed,' Vernon replied. 'The how of it will have to wait- for now, we need to focus on getting as many people out of the city as possible. Now go, quickly.'

Tomalon's group was one of the last to leave, giving him the chance to watch as the first Spartans started hesitantly approaching the encampment. They came in ones and twos at first, small groups or lone Spartans separated from their clans. The Ghosts directed the ones on foot towards the evacuation aircraft and boats, while sending the mounted northerners across the bridge.

It struck Tomalon then, as the trickle turned into a flood and more Spartans started to come through that he was watching the end of the city of Nasces. There would be no place for Spartans there after the Blackheads came. The loss of an entire city. Millions of people- an entire culture- displaced from their homes. This is what it has come to.

Tomalon sighed, and gave the order for his group to move out. We have to save as many as we can. But we'll never save them all.

13

Zero sprinted to the second Chopper and jumped into the seat. There was no room for the Blackhead he'd been pulling around- it would have to stay here. He pressed a general order to kill into its mind. I'll find another way to make sure Marco stays dead.

Zero kick-started the bike and gunned it out of the motor pool, up into the street. The power surging through his mind told him Marco had gone left, so he twisted the bike round and fired the boosters. The sheer force of the jets underneath the exotic bike threw him back in the seat as the chopper flew towards his quarry. Less than a hundred meters ahead was Marco, pulling up onto the main highway south through the city. Zero followed, racing onto the highway seconds after Marco.

The highway was deserted, surprisingly, although a few miles ahead Zero could see some sort of procession moving slowly forward. From the more elevated position Zero could see a little more of the city and his surroundings, and it was not a pretty sight- every second building lay in ruins, and gunfire and explosions sounded all around. A war was being fought- but Zero neither knew nor cared who between or what for. He had but one goal.

For a few moments the two choppers tore down the highway, barely fifty meters between them. Macro wasn't a bad driver but he plainly didn't know his way around the exotic vehicle; neglecting the booster jets underneath the main engine. Zero, meanwhile, had used a chopper before during a particularly memorable part of the league wars. And now here we are again.

As they approached the line of vehicles ahead their purpose became clear; it was an evacuation convoy of transports and armored vehicles, trundling slowly towards the SolNas bridge and the safety it would bring. That was probably Marco's destination as well, which meant Haru was almost certainly there. Zero smiled in anticipation of putting an end to her life as well. His dream was interrupted, however, by a burst of gunfire from the rear of the convoy. Zero swerved to avoid the bullets, seeing Marco doing the same ahead. The other spartan spun his chopper on it's wheel and gunned it to the right, straight off the highway. With a little more finesse Zero followed him, dropping heavily back onto the road that ran below.

Marco was now less than thirty meters ahead and Zero decided to remind him that he was being chased, firing a burst from the chopper's cannons. The shots went wide to the right, but Marco obviously panicked and turned sharply to the left, almost rolling the bike. Zero fired his boosters, hoping to ram Marco but the other spartan discovered his own just in time, jumping ahead and out of Zero's path. Zero rolled his chopper around, giving chase once more.

More gunfire ahead, but this time not directed at the two riders. Two squads of Spartans were exchanging fire at a crossroads, one side from a parked warthog. The end of the world, and they still fight amongst themselves. But how different am I? The warthog gunner noticed the approaching choppers too late and Marco rammed it. Zero fancied he could see pieces of the gunner come out of Marco's front wheel, and grimly realized that the minced spartan would be unlikely to get enough time to respawn.

The impact slowed Marco down and Zero got close enough to begin firing again, rattling off half a dozen shots. Two of them hit, one flaring Marco's shields and the other blowing a piece of armor off the chopper. The force of the hit threw his chopper to the side and it started to spin. I have you. Zero gunned his bike and fired the boosters, ramming the other spartan side on. The exotic vehicle exploded in a cloud of blue fire while Zero's shields flared against the rain of metal pieces.

Zero stopped the chopper abruptly, turning it back to face the wreck of Marco's vehicle. A piece of the wreckage moved and Zero opened fire, seeing shields lighting up behind the smoke. He kept firing until he was sure nothing else was moving, and then got out of his chopper.

Zero walked slowly to the smoldering wreck, keeping his rifle aimed at where he thought Marco had been. As the smoke cleared, he was rewarded by the sight of his enemy lying in a pool of his own blood, breathing his last.

You deserve this, you fuck. Zero pushed the thought at Marco.

'You have... no idea what we're... trying to do,' Marco said in shuddering gasps, spitting blood against the inside of his helmet. With a jerky arm he reached up and pulled it off. 'We were going to... build a better world.'

'Good luck doing that now,' Zero said with a laugh. 'I've seen you die a few times before, but this will be the last won't it? By the time you respawn the Blackheads will have eaten the core you're tied to.' Zero laughed again, hollow and bitter. 'Your plans are finished.'

'My world will... will come about,' Marco said as blood continued to flood from the myriad holes punched through his armor. 'Where we all...' he took a ragged breath 'we all...'

'Save your breath,' Zero said, and shot Marco through the head, before turning and walking back to his chopper, feeling none of the joy he had expected.

14

Alcor opened communications shortly after they became airborne.

'That went well,' he said. 'The Ash Mesa mainframe was pathetically easy to gain access to. They ought to be ashamed.'

'Very nice, Alcor,' Elesa replied. 'Now how exactly do we get onto this space station?'

'Well, in our haste we managed to miss the launch window, so you're going to have to perform a transfer burn to actually get to the Anchor. A terrible waste of Delta-V, but we don't really have a choice.'

'Okay,' Lucas said. 'And how, exactly, do we do that?'

'Just follow the instructions I'm sending,' Alcor replied. 'You just need to input them into your flight computer, Lucas, and both Sabres should perform them.'

Elesa tuned out of the resultant technical discussion. She didn't understand a word of what was being said, and from the sounds of it neither did Lucas.

'Not much further to go,' she said encouragingly, turning to Gigolo. 'We're almost there.'

Gigolo nodded. 'It will be good to get this over with.'

'Still, this makes quite a view, doesn't it?' Elesa took in the view out of the cockpit windows. The planet was falling away below them, clouds and mountains miles away now. She could see the curvature of their planet for the first time, as well as seas and lands she had only ever heard about second hand.

'It's... pretty,' Gigolo said awkwardly, straining to see from the RIO seat. 'We live in a pretty place.'

'All the more reason to save it.'

'That's right.'

It took some time for Lucas to execute the transit burn while Elesa watched helplessly. Alcor had locked her out of the controls to prevent any interference with the complicated maneuvers Lucas was pulling off, so all she and Gigolo could do was sit back and watch. Nearly two hours after they had left the atmosphere, a triumphant shout finally came from Lucas.

'There it is!'

Elesa checked the flight computer and sure enough, there was the Anchor, just a few kilometers ahead. Before she could get a good look out of the cockpit, the Sabres began to spin around and Lucas performed another burn to match velocities with the space station, now very close.

'I've unlocked your controls. Be careful when you approach- these things don't handle how you'd expect. Also, don't use the main thrusters. The RCS should be enough.'

Elesa thumbed the button marked RCS and took the Sabre's control stick in her hands. 'Got it. Let's blow this joint.' Behind her, Gigolo sniggered.

'Are we expecting much opposition?' Lucas asked Alcor.

'Not much- wait, there are already two Sabres parked on the station. I'm not sure if you'll have to fight them, though-'

'Too late,' Lucas interrupted. 'Here they come.' Elesa's HUD marked the two Sabres as they flew out of the Anchor's hangar. Lucas laughed. 'I've always wanted to do this. Going loud!'

Lucas opened up his throttle and spurred his spacecraft forwards, charging towards the enemy spaceships. Both opened fire with their cannons, but Lucas dodged easily with a lazy roll and began returning fire.

'Help him, Elesa!' Gigolo urged.

'I'm trying!' Elesa shouted back. She pushed the stick forwards and the Sabre lunged after Lucas, closing the distance quickly. One of the enemy spacecraft broke off and began to approach her, cannons firing. Elesa jerked the stick to the side, but the enemy Sabre tracked her movements and she took a full broadside.

'Shields at fifty percent,' Gigolo said. 'Shoot back, for goodness sake!'

'Shut up!' Elesa shouted. 'I've never flown a spaceship before!' She spun the stick and the Sabre rotated on the spot. Another button released a hail of missiles, which struck the pursuing Sabre head on as it passed mere meters below her. Through the flame and shield flare Elesa saw the other pilot grinning in his seat. 'Cocky bastard,' she muttered, and pulled the Sabre into a pursuit.

Lucas, meanwhile, was running rings around his opponent and laughing all the while. 'Take that, asshole!' he shouted as he released a

volley of his own missiles against the enemy ship. 'This is more fun than I've had in years!' Elesa quietly turned the audio from Lucas's Sabre down.

Her own opponent was proving tough to get a handle on. He dodged most of her attacks with ease, and was becoming increasingly difficult to shake in pursuits. Elesa quickly realized that she was outmatched in skill quite substantially. Hoping to gain an advantage, she flew the Sabre in close to the Anchor, skimming along it's surface. The enemy spaceship followed at a distance, not firing for fear of hitting the station.

'Can you do something?' Elesa asked Gigolo. 'Surely that system you're sat at has some purpose?'

'I'm trying to get to grips with it,' Gigolo replied tersely. 'It's harder than it looks.'

'You think? I'm the one flying the fucking spaceship.'

Elesa pulled up to avoid a building stuck out of the rock and came suddenly upon Lucas and the other Sabre. On reflex she fired a volley of missiles, catching the pilot unawares. The volley impacted as she flew past, blowing out the Sabre's shields and sending it in a tumble. Lucas fired his own missiles seconds later, finishing off the enemy spacecraft.

'Cheers,' he said over their radio. 'Now let's kill that other one. Be warned- I'm all out of rockets now.'

Elesa spun her Sabre to fight her pursuer, only to see that it was far closer than she had realized. Cannon fire pelted her shields as a volley of missiles streaked from its launchers. Desperately Elesa tried to pull her Sabre out of the firing line, but the missiles were too close- they struck, knocking out her shields and sending her spaceship into a spin.

'Lucas!' Elesa shouted desperately. 'Kill it!'

'I'm on it,' Lucas replied, sounding strangely calm. As Elesa righted the spin she saw the enemy Sabre coming right for her- and Lucas's Sabre approaching at speed from above. 'Tell Midori I love her,' Lucas said quietly, as his Sabre smashed into the enemy.

Lucas's Sabre was ripped in two by the collision, with the larger part tumbling down towards the planet. The enemy Sabre was flung intact back into the anchor, where it exploded in a silent fireball.

'Lucas!' Gigolo shouted.

'Hold on!' Elesa cried. 'We're coming for you!'

'No. Leave me,' Lucas said calmly. 'I've still got enough delta-v to land this thing. Finish the mission.'

'But if you die-'

'Some things are worth dying for,' Lucas interrupted. 'Now finish this.'

Elesa was silent for a moment, watching Lucas's Sabre disappear into the darkness. 'Okay,' she said finally. 'But we'll find you again.'

'When all this is over, tell Midori to meet me in Oaktier,' Lucas said.

'I'll be there,' Midori said over Alcor's up-link. 'I promise.'

'We'll be there too,' Gigolo added. 'See you soon.'

Lucas's Sabre began to glow as it entered the atmosphere, and any further communication became impossible.

27. Those who Fight Further (5)

15

Marco had been headed south, so Zero continued in the same direction. He knew Marco well enough- had known, he thought with a smile- to know that when in danger he'd run straight for his girlfriend, Haru, who just happened to be next on Zero's hit list. I'm coming for you too, bitch..

The tall buildings prevented Zero from seeing much of what was happening in the rest of the city and its surroundings, but from the frequent booms and roars he was pretty sure that some major battles were being fought. Aircraft began to appear above, many bearing the markings of the Ghost Alliance. That surprised him a little, but he pressed on. It makes no difference. I have but one goal now..

As he headed further south, a new light became visible to the eyes in Zero's head. Someone with the same power, but strong. So strong that their light dwarfed the handful of other lights around them. There are others? I'll just kill them too.. Zero gunned the engine on his chopper and raced towards the constellation in his mind.

The lights were in an area of Nasces that Zero knew fairly well, near the old docks. He passed more convoys headed for the SolNas bridge, as well as countless stragglers on foot or in beaten up vehicles. Many glared enviously at his Chopper when he raced past, but kept walking. No doubt they were hoping to escape the city before the Blackheads Zero could sense to the north arrived. If he achieved his goal, Zero thought he might follow them. Or not. With Vivian dead, do I have much else to live for? Maybe I'll just let a Blackhead run me through and be done with it..

All of a sudden he was there. Mere meters away stood Haru, the woman he wanted dead more than anything else. A handy ramp provided a jump over the fence; Zero floored the Chopper and went for it. Time slowed down as he cleared the fence, and he perceived what happened next in a strange clarity.

Haru spun in surprise at the noise, followed slowly by the two Spartans stood behind her. Zero kicked off the Chopper, sending it flying towards the three of them, and curled up to roll. Haru threw herself to the floor, dodging the bike by an inch. The other two were

not so lucky, catching the Chopper cleanly in their chests.

Zero rolled to his feet and lunged at Haru, a knife in his hand. She tried to dodge clumsily and he caught her, ramming the blade between her ribs.

'You!' she exhaled heavily, pushing him away with inhuman strength. Zero fell back, pulling a second knife out of its sheaf as Haru drew his first out of her chest. 'How?'

'Your boyfriend is dead, bitch.' Zero smiled. 'You're going to pay just like he did.'

'You killed Marco?' For a second Haru looked concerned, but the expression was quickly replaced by contempt. 'A shame, but I warned him to be careful around you. What was it that made you snap?'

'What do you think?' Zero snarled, and lunged with the knife. Haru stepped back, then counterattacked; Zero jumped out of range. 'You killed the only person I ever held dear.'

Haru laughed. 'I guessed that would do it.' She pointed the knife at him, smiling. 'Have you figured it out yet? The reason you have this power?'

'To kill you,' Zero replied.

'You're close,' Haru said. 'Try again!'

'Fuck you!' Zero lunged again, dodging Haru's counter thrust and swinging the knife at her throat. She rolled away and it bounced harmlessly off her shields.

'This brings back memories, doesn't it?' Haru laughed again. 'You and me, fighting on a rooftop. You and me, fighting in that prison cell. You and me, fighting together for our survival.'

Zero paused. Memories returned unbidden. The four of them fighting the Strikers at Jurisan, and later fighting other Aspertians in the wreckage of their home. 'That's in the past,' Zero said. 'And it would have stayed there if you had just left me alone. But you had to go and draw me back in. I'm done with you,' Zero was shouting now, 'I'm done with your shit! All of this is your fault! You, and Marco, and Meier, who just couldn't leave me alone! I'm going to kill you all!' What... what is this feeling?

Haru smiled. 'Can you feel it?'

Oh... I see. 'Sure I can,' Zero said.

'Good,' Haru said. 'Then you understand?'

'Enough to know that you still have to die.' Zero twisted his face into a smile. 'For old times sake, huh?'

'So you'll not join me?' Haru looked sad for a moment. 'I had hoped that you would. For old times sake.' She shook her head. 'Let's raise the stakes a little, shall we?' She raised her hands, and a lone blackhead jumped over a nearby wall and landed between them. 'No weapons,' she continued, dropping the bloody knife. 'Just our

minds.'

Zero dropped his knife as well, and reached out to the Blackhead with his mind. 'I'm going to enjoy ending you.'

'Not nearly as much as I will,' Haru replied, and lunged. The Blackhead lunged with her, but Zero pushed it away. The two of them collided, separated, and collided again. The Blackhead stood a few meters away, dancing madly as two hostile minds sought to gain purchase in its head. Haru punched Zero hard in the face; he kicked her in the chest. The physical struggle was just a side note to the real battle taking place in three heads, however. Through the eyes in his mind Zero could see Haru's thoughts, feel them batter against his own. In those moments he understood how she felt. He saw her hatred, her pride, her love. In a twisted way she loved him, more than she had ever loved Marco. The thought of it repulsed him.

It quickly became obvious that Zero had the upper hand in the mental fight. Bit by bit he clawed his way into the Blackhead's mind, pushing Haru out and taking control. The Blackhead slowly moved towards Haru, sword extended.

'So we see whose resolve is stronger,' Haru panted. 'Whose goal more worthwhile. But why is it yours?'

'The goal doesn't matter,' Zero replied through heavy breaths.

'So I see,' Haru said. She backed away, exhausted from the fight that still raged. 'Although...' She looked at Zero, that old smile on her lips. 'Vivian's still alive, you know.'

'Don't lie,' Zero replied angrily. 'Don't sully her name.'

'How could we have killed her? She's been out of the city since shortly after we took you.' A mental image accompanied the statement, of Vivian and Tomalon in an aircraft bearing the insignia of the Ghost Alliance.

'No!' Zero shouted. 'You killed her!'

'Look into my mind. I tell no lie.'

Haru's mind pressed against Zero's, and he saw the truth of what she said. Vivian is alive? Then what... why am I fighting?

The power left Zero as abruptly as it had entered him, all in a rush. The eyes in his mind closed, and the Blackhead returned to Haru's control.

'Game over, Zero,' she said. The blackhead approached Zero slowly, raising its sword. 'Enjoy hell.'

No! I have so much more to-

The sword that entered his chest felt like ice, spreading numbness through his body. He suddenly felt so very tired. No... I can fight..._

Zero's eyes closed, and the life left him.

After the excitement of the battle with the Builders, things quietened down for Vivian. She took a lightly laden Falcon northwards from the Ghosts temporary base at the end of the SolNas bridge to supervise the evacuation efforts.

Fortunately- or perhaps worryingly- almost one in five the clans in Nasces were conducting their own evacuations. The lucky ones which had been relatively untouched by the fighting that had taken place in the city over the past few days were packing up their members and everything they could carry and heading south. A great tide of Spartans was bearing down on Solidade from the north; so many that the fifty meter wide SolNas bridge could not permit them all. A traffic jam was forming from the bridge back into the city, snarling up the roads around the Ghosts camp. That was in itself a problem, as there wasn't a chance that every Spartan could escape the city before the Blackheads arrived.

The other eighty percent were not so lucky. A good number simply lacked the resources to get all of their members out of the city. In several cases the leaders had simply upped and left, leaving entire clans stranded and without direction. Others had been badly hit during the fighting, including all of the leading clans of the Nasces Alliance, many of whom were inexplicably fighting each other.

'From what we've been able to discover, it seems as though there was an attack on the Nasces Alliance involving controlled Blackheads,' Vivian reported. 'All of the leaders were assassinated, and their clans were flung into chaos.'

'Any clue who did it?' Tomalon asked. 'The Builders had someone who could control Blackheads, didn't they?'

'Gigolo,' Vivian murmured. She shook her head, and then remembered she was talking over radio. 'No. At least, I don't think so.' Gigolo wouldn't kill, would he? 'The Builders themselves came under attack from someone controlling Blackheads. That may have been Gigolo.'

'If it is a third party we're in danger while they're around,' Tomalon said. 'If you get word of any Blackhead sightings, we need to know.'

'Got it,' Vivian replied, and closed the connection. She pulled the Falcon up into the sky, leaving the maze of buildings behind. The cloud cover was low; it looked about ready to rain, and the sun was fast leaving the sky. Not good omens, especially considering the black mass visible on the horizon. The horde was still a few hours out, but easily visible from the city as a stain to the north. Its size was impressive and terrifying. 'There's no way we can beat it. I just hope Alcor's plan works._

'Torridon requests help in their evacuation,' one of the squad leaders in her group informed her. 'They need capacity for a thousand Spartans.'

'We can't spare that many aircraft_. Vivian put the aircraft in neutral and took a look at the spreadsheet she'd been constructing. All of the Ghosts aircraft were currently engaged, but one of the wealthier clans might be able to spare some. 'Ask Jezebel if they can

help transport some,' she said, picking one of the clans who'd said they didn't need help. 'Also try... Syren, and Firos Tand if Jezebel can't take all the slack.'

'Got it,' the leader replied. Vivian made a few notes on the spreadsheet and turned her attention back to the north. Looking at the horde made her feel queasy.

'Blackheads!' came a sudden shout. Vivian's stomach lurched, and she quickly opened a return channel.

'Where? How many?'

'Garlan avenue, just outside the Fresia building. Looks like five, some Spartans with them.'

'I'll handle this,' Vivian replied. 'Keep a look out for more.' She turned to the two gunners in the back of the Falcon. 'We're headed down to check out a report of Blackheads in the city.'

'We'll keep an eye out.'

Of course, this is all dependent on me being able to do shit about it. Vivian frowned. Why on earth was she doing this herself? It wasn't like she was incapable of delegating. I felt something... just for a moment, I did. She shook her head. Never mind. I'll check this out and then return to my job.

The Blackheads were where her informant had said, jogging down a street in the shade of a line of buildings. They scattered when they saw the Falcon, and were quickly cut down by the gunners. The two Spartans made a break for a narrow alley a little further up the street. Not going to happen. Vivian cut them down just the same with her Falcon's nose gun, and then continued the way they had been running. She cut the Falcon's power as much as possible and quietly jumped over the row of buildings, peeking into the next street. A single figure stood, surrounded by Blackheads and a few corpses.

Vivian shot the Blackheads down in a single burst and moved on the Spartan. 'Don't move!' she shouted, using the Falcon's loundspeaker. 'Put your hands on your head and prepare to be taken into custody!'

The figure turned slowly to face the Falcon, revealing a familiar, smiling face.

Vivian's breath caught. Haru. She had hoped the woman would be dead, lost in Aspertias. Of course she could not be so lucky. You traitorous witch! I'll kill you! Before she knew what was happening, her fingers tightened on the trigger, and a burst of fire ran Haru through. Shit!

Vivian landed the Falcon and jumped out, calling for the gunners to keep watch. She ran to Haru's prone form, now bleeding heavily from the chest.

'Haru!' she knelt down and looked at the wound. It was bad, too much for a Spartan to bear.

'Vivian?' Haru looked puzzled. 'I should... should have figured you'd come after him.'

'Zero?' Vivian leaned in. 'Where is he? Tell me!'

Haru coughed weakly then smiled. 'He's gone where you can't get him.' Vivian's blood ran cold. 'He understood in the end, though. We'll spend an eternity together... an eternity in hell.' She closed her eyes and exhaled once. _Hell?_

'No! No, you bitch! Don't die now!' Vivian shook Haru's corpse. 'Tell me! Where is he! Is he-' her voice faltered for a moment- 'is he dead?' Haru spoke no more.

Vivian stood up quickly and looked around, inspecting the bodies lying in the street. The two underneath a chopper were obviously female, but the one out in the open-

Vivian walked to the white-armored body, her mouth dry. It was Zero.

She fell to her knees, unable to take her eyes from Zero's face. There was no mistaking the sword that ran him through. _He's dead... dead for good._ Vivian tried to rationalize that thought, add it to her worldview. It simply didn't fit. There wasn't space in her world for Zero not to be alive. Even when he'd gone missing, she'd assumed that she'd be able to find him again. But he was gone.

'Did he mean a lot to you?'

Vivian stood up suddenly, seeing a Spartan stood a few meters away. His armor's markings were different to Haru's, but some of the details looked similar. 'Who are you?' she asked, drawing her weapon.

'My name is Dean, but I don't expect you've ever met me.' The Spartan held his hands out. 'I mean you no harm.'

'Were you with Haru?' Vivian didn't lower her rifle.

'Not strictly,' Dean replied. He kept his hands held out, talking slowly. 'She had some interesting ideas for change in our world.' Vivian noticed that his face was horribly scarred through his visor. _What could have caused that?_

'She killed him,' Vivian said. 'She murdered him in cold blood. Now I'll never talk to him again.'

Dean nodded. 'She was also quite insane, as was her boyfriend. I'm sorry for your loss.'

Vivian finally lowered her weapon. 'So what now? I've killed your leader.'

Dean nodded. 'I have the same power she did, albeit not so strongly.' He looked at Haru's body, lips moving silently. 'The Universalists will need a new leader. Someone with ideals, and the strength to see them made real.'

'You're fucking welcome to it,' Vivian said. 'Now scram.' Dean left

as silently as he had arrived.

Vivian dragged Zero's body to the Falcon, yelling at the gunners to help him in, and then took off, empty.

17

The anchor was an eerie place when Gigolo and Elesa docked and entered. The lights were out, or flickering erratically, and there was no sound outside their helmets thanks to the depressurization Elesa had caused before docking on Alcor's suggestion. A few limp bodies hung in the air, their bloodshot eyes staring accusingly as Gigolo passed.

'Are you sure there's nobody left?' he asked, checking an indent with his flashlight. 'If even one of them was wearing their suits, we could be in for a world of hurt.'

'They don't bring their armor with them,' Alcor replied. 'It weighs far too much. In any case, you didn't depressurize every compartment, just the ones you need to get to the control room.'

'So there are still Builders alive in the station?'

'Yes, but I've sealed all the bulkheads. You don't need to worry about them.'

'What will happen to the trapped Builders?'

'They'll probably starve to death, or maybe they'll die from asphyxiation,' Elesa replied. 'Whatever the case, they'll respawn back in Cressat, same as always.' She fixed Gigolo with a stare. 'We don't need to worry about them.'

Gigolo nodded. 'Just wondering.'

The two of them continued in silence to the control room. As they entered, the doors closed behind them and the lights came on. Gigolo whipped around, expecting an ambush.

'Sorry!' Alcor said quickly. 'That was me. I'm going to pump some air back in to relieve your helmet filters.' As he spoke, an audible hiss filled the room. After a few moments the pressure alert symbol in the corner of Gigolo's HUD turned off and he disabled the helpful no-atmosphere mode.

'Funny that our helmets have this system,' he said, looking at the toggle suspiciously. 'Why would they need this feature?'

'I think it was to protect from gas attacks originally,' Alcor replied absently. 'Now, I need you to go to the main console and do exactly as I say.'

'Alright then,' Gigolo replied as he approached the console. 'What do I do?'

'Is it locked?'

Gigolo squinted at the screen. 'No, actually. Um.' He looked around and noticed a corpse hanging in the air some way above the console,

which on closer inspection had blood coating some of it's buttons. 'What luck, huh.'

'Evidently. Now, I need you to open up the main menu and click on the systems icon.'

Gigolo searched through the list of functions and did so. 'Got it.'

'There should be another icon marked Harpoon. Click on it.'

Gigolo looked again. 'It isn't there,' he said, not seeing it. 'Are you sure?'

There was a momentary pause. 'Pretty sure. I've got the documentation right here. Okay... open up the command line interface.'

'The what?' Gigolo asked.

'Just return to the main menu. There should be a button marked CMD.' Gigolo did as he said. 'Now type 'insysconfig' and hit enter.'

Gigolo followed the next few instructions, not really understanding what he was doing. 'Why didn't you want to come up here, again?' he asked after entering a long series of commands. 'You seem to be pretty good at this sort of thing.'

'Space travel, at my age?' Alcor laughed. 'What did that last command return? Any mention of the Harpoon system?'

'Not that I can see,' Gigolo said, scanning the list. 'Is that a problem?'

Alcor was silent for a long while. 'It may be,' he replied eventually. 'If the icon isn't there, then it means that the Harpoon weapon system hasn't been installed.'

'Why hasn't it been installed?' Elesa asked. 'You said it would have been by now, didn't you?'

'No,' Alcor replied. 'Give me one moment... yeah, I thought so.' He laughed.

'What is it?' Gigolo asked, frustrated. 'What's the hold up?'

'The Harpoon system was supposed to have been installed by now- but it was going to be sent up on the spacecraft you and Lucas stole.' Alcor sighed. 'Damn.'

'Well shit,' Gigolo swore. 'What do we do? If we can't use the Harpoon, then we've lost.'

'I have an idea,' Elesa said suddenly. 'When I was flying around the Anchor, I noticed a few cylindrical outputs around the equator. Would those happen to be, say, engines?'

'The Anchor has some engines,' Alcor confirmed. 'They were used to shunt it into an equatorial orbit from it's original Polar Orbit. But what help would that be? You can't mean to-' Alcor paused.

'Oh.'

'What?' Gigolo asked, confused. Why does everything go over my head? He resolved to take some lessons on astrophysics if he ever had the chance.

'You said the Harpoons were powerful because they were dropped from space,' Elesa said. 'So what if we dropped the entire space station?'

'That would flatten the whole city,' Alcor said quietly. 'It would kill everyone who lives there, and wreck Solidade.'

'Would it stop the Blackheads?' Gigolo asked.

'In the same way that dropping a bomb on a plant 'stops' it from growing,' Alcor answered.

'Do we have any other options?' Elesa asked.

'Shit,' Alcor breathed. First time I've heard him swear, Gigolo realized. 'I guess not.'

'Then we do it,' Elesa said firmly.

'Okay then,' Alcor said. 'You'll have to give me a moment to run some calculations; we need to make sure the station lands exactly on the city. That means you'll have to enter some more commands, and make sure you enter them correctly. The slightest error here could be disastrous.'

As if it hadn't been that way already.

28. Those who Fight Further (6)

18

'Zero's dead.' Vivian said the words flatly, but even over the radio Tomalon could hear the tension in her voice.

'How? Are you sure?' Tomalon asked. That's unexpected. I didn't think he'd still be in Nasces.

'I've got his body with me,' Vivian replied in a measured tone. 'He was killed by a Blackhead.'

Tomalon wasn't too upset, truth be told. He'd not liked Zero to begin with, and being in direct competition for Vivian made it worse. It was a shame that it had upset Vivian, though, and he'd have to be careful to act sympathetic. 'I... I'm sorry. I know he meant a lot to you.'

'No, you don't.' Vivian sighed. 'I just need a moment, okay?' She stopped transmitting.

Damn. I'd better be careful. Tomalon turned his attention back to the strategic map. The Ghosts had almost fifteen thousand personnel in the city and that many again had come from the Panthers and the Strikers, of all places, to assist in the defense. The Panthers

provided mainly air support- their air force was second to no clan in the north- while the Strikers were bringing some of their considerable military might. Not everyone was happy though, as Tomalon could hear from several meters away.

'We could save more if you let us take the refugees back to our bases,' the Striker commander was arguing. 'The president won't allow us to use our aircraft if we're just ferrying them straight to you.'

'I appreciate your help,' Vernon replied diplomatically, 'But many Spartans are still uncomfortable working with Strikers as it is. They would view us allowing you to evacuate Spartans as a breach of the terms on your expansion, as per the treaty you signed.'

'Fine! But the blood of those who die today will be on your hands.' The Striker commander walked away, muttering angrily.

'They don't like people mentioning the war,' the Panther commander remarked.

'I don't care what they like or dislike,' Vernon replied. 'I just want to get as many people out of this city as possible.' He glanced towards Tomalon. 'What's the ETA?'

'Half an hour till they enter the city,' Tomalon replied. 'Another half hour before they reach us here.'

Vernon cursed quietly. 'There will still be millions of Spartans in the city when that happens.'

'Fewer than if you'd done nothing,' Tomalon said.

Vernon nodded. He takes praise better than Meier did. Or I did, for that matter.

An alert sounded in Tomalon's HUD. It was an incoming communication from Alcor, whom Vernon had given priority access. Vernon opened the call, forwarding the details to all of the allied commanders.

'Do you have an update?' Vernon asked.

'We've run into a problem,' Alcor replied. 'My force has taken the Anchor, but discovered that the Harpoon module has not been installed.'

'And?'

'We've come up with another plan. The Anchor still has the engines that were used to move it into it's current orbit, and they still work.' Alcor started to talk faster. 'The principle of the Harpoons is simple; it's just huge amounts of kinetic energy. Well, if we used the engines to de-orbit the space station, we could use it as a giant Harpoon of sorts.'

There was a stunned silence, broken by the quiet laughter of the Panther commander. 'That's a good plan,' he said.

Tomalon thought quickly. How much larger was the Anchor than a Harpoon? Thousands of times, surely. The impact would be

enough-

'That would destroy Nasces,' Vernon said.

'And ruin Solidade. It would probably seriously damage Oaktier, Melaska and Daath as well.'

'You'd kill every Spartan still in Nasces,' Vernon said. 'Their cores would be destroyed; they'd be gone for good.'

'We don't have a choice.'

'You're going to kill millions of Spartans.'

'How many more will die if we don't stop the Blackheads here?' Alcor asked, clearly exasperated. 'Our entire species could go extinct. I'm telling you, we don't have a choice!'

Vernon sighed. 'You've already put this into action, haven't you?'

Alcor didn't respond for a moment. 'Look,' he began. 'Either you can hold the line and save the entire population of the Central and Eastern continents, or you can refuse and damn them. Either way, the Anchor is going to hit Nasces.'

'You will burn for this, Alcor.' Vernon stood up. 'Recall all the aircraft. We're making a stand here until that damned space station lands. Get those fortifications complete!'

'Thank you, Vernon.' Alcor sounded tired.

'Don't thank me for my part in this,' Vernon said. 'I just hope you can sleep tonight.'

19

The fortifications had advanced substantially by the time Vivian returned with the last of the Falcons, just ahead of the first wave of Blackheads. They were arranged in shells around the SolNas bridge, rows of walls and sandbags with gun emplacements fitted behind as well as spaces for vehicles to act as mobile turrets. The whole thirty thousand alliance Spartans were arranged behind or above them, weapons at the ready. It was a very impressive sight to behold, yet nothing compared to what they faced.

Vivian landed her Falcon and hurried to Tomalon's side.

'Good work out there' Vernon said, looking up as she approached. 'We're headed out to the forward staging area,' he gestured to the field of equipment and barricades, 'Since we can't see much from here.'

'How long do we have?' Vivian asked. She'd seen glimpses of the Blackheads from her Falcon- a dark tide, sweeping through the city destroying everything it met. Most clans still in the city were providing resistance; their fortified bases holding by sheer virtue of there not being enough space for all the Blackheads to attack at once. Not one of them stood a chance in the long run.

Tomalon glanced at the clock on the table. 'Four minutes,' he said.

The three of them moved forward along with a number of Vernon's aides and other commanders to an elevated platform about thirty meters from the edge of the defenses. A few gun emplacements were set up, though nobody was manning them.

'The best view in the world,' Vernon remarked as he showed them up. He drew a Battle Rifle and aimed it at the street ahead.

'For the worst show in the world,' Tomalon added, drawing his Light Rifle and checking its magazine.

I am about to see the end of the world, Vivian realized as she drew her own weapon.

The Blackheads came. They appeared around a bend in the street ahead, first a few bodies racing ahead of the crowd, and then a massive horde. Thousands of Blackheads filled the street in just a few seconds, charging towards the alliance defenses.

Vernon didn't wait. 'Open fire!' he commanded, and all hell broke loose. Vivian was deafened by the sounds of a thousand machine guns firing and blinded by their muzzle flashes. A solid wall of metal bore down on the horde, cutting clean through the first rows and penetrating deep into their ranks. Warthogs of all kinds fired their turrets; the handful of Scorpions arranged towards the back fired their cannons; the lone wraith somebody had produced from goodness knows where began to launch mortars at the oncoming horde. In those first few seconds, hundreds upon thousands of the horde fell.

More took their place, clambering over the bodies of their comrades. They came on, charging through the hailstorm of bullets, making progress despite the colossal losses they took. Where one fell a dozen took its place, more and more pressing down the streets towards the open area surrounding the SolNas bridge and its defenders. Within a minute they had reached the edge of the buildings and began to spread out into the space where they were harder to target, rushing the defenses. Despite the huge amount of gunfire they made contact moments later, jumping the walls or cutting their way through. Spartans began to fall and seconds later the outer layer of defenses was lost as the next row fired upon their own allies in the hope of keeping them alive.

Vivian watched the battle unfold in a daze, only firing when Tomalon shouted at her to start doing something. She unloaded a clip into the horde, not bothering to pick targets or look for the results of her fire, knowing only that something would take the bullets.

The second row was swamped after less than a minute, the defenders killing themselves to avoid being speared on the Blackheads swords. The next layer began to take the heat, just a few meters away from where Vivian was stood. Tomalon stopped firing, and shouted above the roar of the guns.

'We should get out of here!' he yelled. 'Our defenses are falling much faster than we expected!'

'Let's go,' Vernon shouted back. He got the attention of the others

on the platform and began to make his way off the platform.

Then the last row of defenders began to fall.

Blackheads swarmed up to the platform, moving at inhuman speeds. Shocked, Vivian raised her gun and began firing again, picking off the Blackheads as they tried to climb the stairs to the rear. They fell en masse as more fire cut into their rear from the other defenders, but there were too many to overcome. The commanders, cut off from the rest of their troops, were forced to retreat back up the stairs onto the platform.

'We need an evac now!' Vivian heard Tomalon scream. The Panther falcons began to move their way, but too slow- the Blackheads were charging up the stairs now, swords ready to kill._ This is the end,_ Vivian thought, and closed her eyes.

A sudden motion in the platform caused her to open them again. She fell forward and grabbed onto the floor as the platform lurched sickeningly, throwing the Blackheads away. Above her Vernon stumbled and fell; she stretched an arm out and caught him by his wrist. He swung in and took his own hold on the floor, still barking orders.

Something must have given way underneath the platform for it continued to sway, denying the Blackheads purchase when they tried to jump up. Vernon had managed to find a stable position and was firing at them as they jumped. Vivian drew her own weapon and did the same. _We're only delaying the inevitable_. A large group jumped all at once on a perfect parabola, their swords outstretched to spear the group of Spartans. As they were still hanging in the air, the platform collapsed fully. Vivian was thrown free, tumbling through the air. A vision of Blackheads swarming below her filled her mind- she was about to hit them-

A sudden sharp pain blossomed in her back and she was jerked painfully into the air. She swung wildly for a few moments, unable to comprehend what was going on. The field of Blackheads was growing smaller beneath her, but that wasn't possible. _Am I flying?_

Vivian looked upwards and laughed in relief. A falcon was flying a few meters above her, connected by a rope from some sort of harpoon to her back, where a bolt had embedded itself in her armor- hence the pain. _Those Panthers... trust them to come up with something like this_. Vernon and Tomalon hung similarly from other Falcons, being pulled safely back behind the lines. Tomalon caught her eye and waved, shouting something.

'What?' Vivian shouted back.

'I said, we're turning the tide!' he repeated. Vivian twisted, trying to get a better view of the battlefield. Sure enough, the initial surge seemed to have receded somewhat, and the fourth row of defenses was proving able to keep them at bay. The horde was still coming, but they were having to climb over mountains of corpses to do so, slowing the rate at which they could assault the defenses.

We might just make it through this after all, Vivian thought. She closed her eyes. _It's up to you now, Alcor._

The commands to cause the Anchor to de-orbit were complicated and long. Alcor had Gigolo program in a series of fail-safes as well, to prevent any terrible accidents.

'What we're doing is terrible, but even worse would be for it to all be for nothing,' Alcor had said on the matter. Gigolo stopped complaining and continued entering the code.

Gigolo finished with a few minutes to spare before the optimal burn point. He entered the last command and immediately began to float towards the nearest wall.

'We're already under acceleration?' Elesa asked.

'It's the attitude jets steering the engines into the correct place,' Alcor replied. 'You'll want to be out of the station before the acceleration starts for real. It'll make getting out a whole lot more difficult.'

'Sounds like a good idea,' Gigolo said. He and Elesa left the control room and made their way back to the Sabre, still docked safely in the hangar.

The acceleration began as they were entering the Sabre. It was a strange feeling even after just a few hours zero gravity; a slight tug of a fraction of a gee. Gigolo was easily able to pull himself into the cockpit, though even as he sat it seemed to be increasing.

Then it stopped suddenly.

Alcor opened communications almost immediately. 'What's happened?' he asked. 'Why has the acceleration stopped?'

'We didn't do anything,' Gigolo replied. 'Is this meant to happen?'

'No!' Alcor shouted, and Gigolo realized how stressed the other spartan was. 'No, there must be something wrong on the Anchor. Give me- shit. Somebody pulled the emergency shutoff on the engines.'

'Can you reverse it?' Elesa asked.

'Not from here, nor from the control room. You'll have to get to the engine room and turn the switch yourself.'

Gigolo jumped out of the cockpit. 'Stay here,' he told Elesa. 'If something goes wrong, take the Sabre and run.'

Elesa sighed. 'Regardless of whether goes wrong, I'm getting you out alive.' She fixed Gigolo with a defiant stare.

'Then I've got nothing to worry about,' Gigolo replied with a smile. He pushed away and made for the hangar exit. There were signs posted all over the station, but Alcor stayed on the radio to give Gigolo directions. The other Spartan was noticeably tense, though Gigolo wasn't sure why. It became clear a minute later, however, as a loud

banging sounded over the radio.

'Oh, no.' Alcor cursed. 'This is as far as I can help you. Sorry.'

'Open up!' Gigolo heard somebody shouting.

'One moment,' Alcor replied. 'Get out of here Midori. Run. Go!'

'Alcor?' Elesa asked. 'Alcor! What's happening?'

'They found me,' Alcor replied grimly. 'Must have noticed all of the bandwidth I've been using.' He sighed, and Gigolo heard the sound of a shotgun being cocked.

Gigolo continued moving. First Lucas, now Alcor? Everyone who helps us ends up getting fucked. He pulled himself quickly down the tunnels that lead to the engine room, venting the atmosphere from each one as he passed through it. He blew the door of the engine room in as the sounds of Alcor being shot and killed came over the radio link, which cut out moments later. The lone Builder hiding in the room had a moment to look surprised before Gigolo ran him through with his Energy Sword and restarted the engine.

Gravity returned with a vengeance as the controlling program tried to compensate for the missed burn time. What had previously been an effortless float now became a near vertical climb against almost a gee of thrust. Gigolo had to drag himself up the walls, praying that he didn't fall. What an ignominious end that would be.

'How far away are you?' Elesa asked, concern in her voice.

'A couple hundred meters,' Gigolo replied. Uphill.

'It's all uphill, isn't it?' Elesa asked. 'I can hear you panting.'

Should have spent more time in the gym after all. Gigolo kept climbing. I'll be there soon.

The statement was undercut by an ominous rumble. The station shook slightly, and then again. Maybe not soon enough.

'We're skimming the atmosphere,' Elesa said. 'Gigolo, if you're going to get out it has to be now.'

'There's not much I can do about it!' Gigolo shouted. He pulled himself onto a ledge which turned out to be a radial tunnel, and sat down heavily. 'I'm not going to make it in time.' Damn. I've too far for it to end like this.

Elesa was silent for a moment. 'I'm undocking,' she said. 'Hold on a moment.'

She's leaving? Gigolo didn't know whether to be hurt or relieved. 'What are you doing?'

'There's a ledge somewhere near you, right? A tunnel?'

'I'm in it,' Gigolo replied, 'But it doesn't go anywhere.'

'It goes near the surface of the rock.' _Oh. Ah._ 'Keep moving along. You'll know when you find me.'

Gigolo stood up and started to run down the tunnel. _How much time do we have?_ The station was starting to shake quite violently now, and the rock on the outer edge of the tunnel was starting to heat up. The tunnel curved gently, starting to incline upwards again, and the run became progressively harder. _If I survive this, I'm taking up cardio._

There was a large tremor and Gigolo stumbled. The rock beneath his feet cracked and splintered. Gigolo tried to get to his feet, but it was suddenly as though he weighed far more than he ever had before. The shaking tunnel didn't help.

I'm not dying here. The realization was sudden and powerful; Gigolo forced himself to his feet with a strength he'd never know before. He began to run again, jumping faults and boulders in the tunnel. Around the curve a more cracked area suddenly became visible; as he watched it exploded inwards, revealing the void beyond. Gigolo jumped through it as the tunnel collapsed behind him. His shield flared as myriad fragments of rock pelted his armor; a larger chunk caught him solidly in the back and sent him spinning.

'Elesa!' he shouted as his world lurched dizzyingly. 'Now would be good!'

There was a sudden thud and the Sabre materialized below him, its acceleration holding him onto its nose. He saw Elesa through the cockpit glass waving at him to hold on. She's not- oh, fuck. Gigolo scrabbled with his hands and feet to find some purchase as the Sabre's main thrusters ignited, pushing it back into a stable orbit. Gigolo was afforded a spectacular view of the Anchor descending slowly into the atmosphere behind Elesa's tiny spacecraft. For a long moment it looked as though the Sabre was about to join it.

Inch by inch the Sabre started regaining height, and after a minute the Anchor was dwindling rapidly. Apparently satisfied, Elesa eased off the acceleration and allowed Gigolo into the cockpit.

'Never do something like that again,' Gigolo wheezed. 'Ever.'

'So next time I shouldn't save your ungrateful ass?' Elesa asked.

Gigolo shook his head, then thought better of it. 'Uh... maybe give me more warning?'

Elesa spun the Sabre slowly until the falling space station was in view. Both Spartans watched in silence as it began to light up in the fires of re-entry.

'We're going to want to see this,' Elesa said quietly. 'We're about to see just what we have wrought.'

direction, sprinting full pelt away from the defending Spartans. The roar of guns fell silent as the Spartans watched their enemy go.

'Where are they going?' Vernon asked over the command channel.

'Looks like they're headed out of the city,' the response came from the aerial unit.

'As expected.' Vernon checked the time. 'They won't make it.'

'How long do we have?' Vivian asked. In response, Vernon simply pointed upwards. Vivian followed his finger, looking up it into the darkening sky.

A lone star was visible in the twilight, slowly growing brighter. As Vivian watched, it grew in size rapidly and a trail of flame appeared behind it. The light appeared to be headed right for them.

Tomalon put his hand on Vivian's shoulder. 'That's absolutely terrifying,' he said.

'You can say that again,' Vivian mumbled in response. Her eyes were glued to the now quite large station as it fell through the upper atmosphere at colossal speed.

'I would like to personally thank everyone who has taken part in this operation,' Vernon said over a megaphone. 'Our victory here has saved the central and eastern continents, and struck a great blow to the Outside Context Problem. This would not have been possible without the help of the Strikers and the Panthers.' The two clan leaders nodded their acknowledgments and Vernon continued. 'In a little under a minute the Anchor space station will collide with the city of Nasces, and destroy it. Until then, you are dismissed.'

There was a moderate laugh from the assembled Spartans at the last line, but the majority were too busy looking to the sky. The Anchor was now very large, and Vivian could feel the heat from its descent on her face. As it bore down on her, she wondered whether this was truly victory.

The Anchor struck Nasces with a force far greater than all of the weapons detonated on the planet in its long history. Everything within a few kilometers was vaporized instantly- buildings, Spartans, the cores that sustained them. Those further out were pummeled by the shock wave and subsequent earthquakes, with the eventual ring of destruction radiating out several hundred kilometers from the blast site. The SolNas bridge was completely destroyed, sinking without a trace into the boiling ocean.

It took minutes for the first Tsunamis to hit Solidade. Waves hundreds of meters tall wrecked the cities docks and everything else less than a kilometer from the coast, as well as flooding large parts of the city and causing untold amounts of damage to buildings and equipment. Waves also battered the coastal cities of Daath, Oaktier and Melaska, and every ship in the area was sunk.

Within a few hours the resulting cloud of dust and debris had spread over a large part of the planet, falling all over as a thick black

rain and blotting out the sun for several days. Temperatures fell by several degrees all over. In arctic Pramos the sea froze ships in the harbor, while in usually hot Cressat the first snow in decades was seen falling in foul black clumps.

Ultimately, the impact did what it was supposed to. Almost all of the cores in Nasces were destroyed, along with the colossal Blackhead Army and the only way it had of escaping the Northern Continent. The comparatively small Alliance force was annihilated as well, although they were to later re-spawn safely. For the millions of Spartans trapped in Nasces, it was the final death.

Was our victory worth the cost?

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Elesa let the spacecraft orbit once. They returned an hour later to be above where Nasces had used to lie. All that could be seen now was a rapidly expanding cloud of dust and debris that obscured the carnage they had wrought.

'What now?' Gigolo asked.

'You mean, where do we go?' Elesa asked back. 'Where is safe for us anymore?'

Gigolo thought for a long while. 'We need to go somewhere we haven't been before. Somewhere remote where they won't know who we are.'

'So, somewhere in the North?'

'Yes,' Gigolo said. 'Let's go North.'

End
file.